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ABSTRACT

The circumstances preceding and following the 1984 merger of two small school districts in North Central New York State contained cooperation, controversy, and disharmony. The school districts had enough similarities--in their rural, agricultural base, in the pride and loyalty with which many residents viewed their schools, in the central role played by each school within the community, and in the economic hardships faced by both schools due to lowered enrollments and increasing educational demands mandated by New York State's Regents Action Plan--to make reorganization plausible yet extremely challenging. Differences between communities added to the reorganization challenge. Ellison's wealthy subpopulation of retirees and summer residents were more in favor of the merger and the promise of lowered taxes that went with it than Gramville residents. Gramville's disproportionate size advantage and tradition created an aura of superiority which disturbed Ellison parents, students, and teachers. The goal of reorganization (to improve educational programs while lessening taxpayer burden) was met, although some benefits arose because of financial incentives offered by the state rather than from reorganization itself. This case study pays particular attention to controversial decisions and incidents surrounding them. Viewpoints of taxpayers, teachers, students, and school administrators are used to convey local perceptions of these events. (NEC)

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New York State College of Agriculture & Life Sciences at
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School District Reorganization: A Qualified Success

by
Gary Canter

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Organizational Alternatives for Small-Rural Schools In New York State*

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Introduction

This case study examines the Gramville Ellison Central School District, a district formed in 1984 after residents of two neighboring districts in Northern New York State voted to reorganize into a single school district. Citizens of these adjacent communities came together with a spirit of cooperation fed by necessity. The former school districts had enough similarities--in their rural, agricultural base, in the fierce pride and loyalty with which many of their residents view their schools, in the central role played by each school within the community, and in the economic hardships faced by both schools due to lowered enrollments and increasing educational demands mandated by New York State's Regents Action Plan--to make the process of combining into a single cohesive unit plausible yet extremely challenging.

Differences between the communities added to the challenge as well: Ellison's wealthy subpopulation of retirees and summer residents who live in the resort area of Ellison Harbor on a large lake were probably more in favor of the merger (and the lowered taxes promised with it) than were the long-time residents of the village who did not own such highly valued property. This created mistrust and disagreement within that district during the period leading up to the merger. Gramville's disproportionate size advantage and the unique prestige and history of its tradition created a perceived aura of superiority which at times

ruffled the feathers of Ellison parents, students and teachers, further adding to the complexity of making reorganization happen.

The following pages will recount the events leading up to and following the reorganization of these two districts. Particular attention will be paid to decisions which were controversial and the incidents surrounding them. The voices of the communities--their taxpayers, teachers, students, and school administrators--will be used wherever possible to convey the local perceptions of these events.

Any merger of two school districts must involve some degree of objection and controversy, particularly in the period immediately following the reorganization. This is the period we studied in Gramville-Ellison. It is therefore not surprising that this is a story which contains some controversy and disharmony. But it is also a story of two communities coming together out of a sincere desire to improve educational opportunities for their youth. Despite the disharmony and the tensions which persist, we are convinced that the reorganization is a success and in some respects a model from which other school districts can learn. In the pages which follow we present a balanced account of the advantages and disadvantages of the reorganization experience in Gramville Ellison.

Description of the Communities

The villages of Gramville and Ellison originally came from the Ellisburg township. Arriving at the turn of the century, the

area's first white settlers recognized the picturesque rolling land as being prime for farming. The village which was to become Gramville was settled in 1802 at a site favorably suited for milling purposes. When a number of wealthy immigrants migrated to the area from the Canadian city of Gramville after the war of 1812, they brought with them the village's name. Prior to that point it was known as Halls Mills, from an early settler by the name of Giles Hall (who was later to play a formative role in the rich educational institution which was to come). In the early 1800s there were 18 small common school houses operating throughout the Gramville area--often held in someone's home--providing children with a primary education. There was not to be a secondary school for the region's children until 1826.

The Ellison area was also settled in 1802, and the town was formed in February of 1806. Its founder was one William Ellison of New York City, who spent parts of each summer in Ellison for a good deal of his life. Around 1807-08, a Presbyterian deacon named Fellows built a sawmill and a gristmill on Big Stoney Creek, and organized the settlement which has grown into the current village of Ellison. The first school in the village was kept in a log house which stood 1 1/4 miles south of Ellison in the winter of 1808-09. In all there were 13 common schools in this area in the first part of the 19th century.

Except for Ellison's waterfront area with its substantial influx of tourism and summer residents, the areas are extremely similar in appearance:

> The two districts are adjacent to each other in such a position and are similar geographically so that it is difficult for one to know when he is in one district or the other.[1]

Gramville encompasses an area of approximately 70 square miles, and Ellison covers approximately 35 square miles. Both districts are extremely rural, with "sparsity level" of 5.83 (persons per acre) for Gramville and 5.86 for Ellison, and pupil density (pupils per square mile) for both districts approximately 5.3. Gramville's population is 3,208, with 411 (13%) of these farm-dwellers. Ellison is home to 1,638 persons, 85 of them (5%) reside on farms. In Gramville the median income by family is $12,215, while in Ellison it is $16,157.

The Labor Market: Farming and Other Business

Both communities can be characterized as property-rich and income-poor. Among New York State's school districts, Gramville ranks in the second-highest quartile in assessed property value per pupil, while Ellison ranks in the top quartile (no doubt due to the resort community of Ellison Harbor). Both districts, however, rank in the lowest quartile of income wealth per pupil. Where once these communities enjoyed a thriving farm industry, with a fair amount of business catering to the farm families, the last several years have brought hardship. In the words of a Gramville resident:

> Farming was the calling card for this community...everywhere you looked there were small farms and they did well. They supported their families and the families before that and they are gone. The only farms that are existing now, are

> the ones that are just making it, or the big ones....It's not worth all the effort, without making ends meet.

A similar sentiment is heard when speaking with the owner of Ellison's general store:

> This (Ellison) was a great farming area, some of the finest farm land in...(the county) in that Ellison Gramville area. At one time you could count the farms on a street on your hands. You can count the farms in the town of Ellison on one hand today.

The unemployment rate is high compared to state and national levels: in 1980 it was approximately 14.4% in both communities. (New York State's unemployment rate in 1980 was 7.5%. The national rate that year was 7.1%). There is relatively little in the way of employment opportunities in the area. There exist a large number of dairy farms, although they are suffering financially due to lowered market value of their products and skyrocketing equipment and maintenance costs. While some residents have opined to us that farmers had been indulgent in the purchase of new machinery during good market times, relying too heavily on credit and thereby mismanaging their operations, there is little dispute that these are not good times for the farmer. One former school board member, the wife of a dairy farmer, told us:

> Our farmers are getting less money and our expenses have gone up just the same just when you can't afford any raises in taxes...the economy in this area is very bad, there's no industry other than farming and farming is not a business to be in right now.

There have been several farm closings in recent years, many of which have been purchased by non-farmers and the fields now lie fallow. In 1950 there were over 12,000 farms in the county,

while in 1970 there were only 1,200. Farm closings such as this have a direct impact on the amount of local financing the school district receives, because the tax base (assessed valuation) of the community is substantially lowered.

In the central village of Ellison there is a mill, two garages, and a general store. There are a variety of restaurants and small retail businesses in Ellison Harbor catering to the resort community. Gramville is little more than a four corners, with a post office, small diner, dry goods store (run by the town's undertaker), television repair shop, and a recently opened farm supply store. Most adults travel to their jobs, as one resident indicated when describing the prospect for work for area students once they graduate:

> Most of us drive a minimum of 25 miles (to work). It's 25 miles to Rederton, and it's 25 miles to Salem. The paper mill is in Salem...There's probably...20 people that work in the paper mill in Salem. There's a lot of places in Rederton... Philby, now there's the bank in Philby, there's a few people employed there...there's a cheese factory, but still not a lot to hold the amount of kids coming out. They got to go somewhere to do something, and then come back.

Lack of industry was not always the case. The towns once had a healthy amount of businesses located within them, according to a local historian and businessman whose farm-supply shop closed two years ago due to economic hardship.

The area's major types of employment are as follows:

Area of employment	Gramville % of work force	Ellison % of work force
Agriculture	34%	13%
Manufacturing	15%	13%
Construction	10%	9%
Educational Services	9%	13%
Retail Trade	8%	21%
Transportation	4%	5%
Other	20%	26%

Because of limited employment opportunities, young people do not settle in the villages. One resident estimated that upwards of 75% of the villagers tend to be elderly and retired. Many of the district's teachers live in the nearby towns of Philby or Sager Corners, while some live further away in Rederton. There has been a slight counter trend in the past eight to ten years, however, whereby some of the small failed farms are being purchased as non-farming homes by younger persons who have work in the cities.

Social Fabric

Volunteer and service organizations play a strong role in the social fabric of the villages of Ellison and Gramville. There are Firemen's Auxiliaries in both communities, as well as a Ladies Auxiliary to the Ellisburg Fire Department which serves Gramville. "Free libraries" operate in both locations, and a local Hospice Care organization serves both communities by attending to the infirm and their families. There is a local chapter of the Masonic Lodge, including a group for Stars (the women's version of the Masons). These organizations and activities provide ongoing social interaction for residents of the region.

Reading the local news and announcements in the Jackson County Journal, the area's weekly paper which is published in Philby, one gets a taste of the flavor associated with rural life. Indeed the weekly "Gramville" column affords a true slice of that small town life, with its almost indiscriminate attention to the mundane as well as the momentous. The author is a longtime resident of the village, who announces social events and travel plans, retirement dinners, alumni gatherings, picnics, church socials, illnesses and recoveries, deaths, funerals and memorial services, and visits to and from out of town children and grandchildren. Within the same column, the writer makes some opinionated political comments--frequently about the school districts--often displaying a conservative, "small town" attitude. The column usually concludes with a home-spun recipe from the personal collection of the writer, or from a reader.

The Methodist Church is the major denomination within the district, with Protestant, Catholic and Episcopalian congregations also present. An interesting precursor to the merger between the Gramville and Ellison communities occurred within the Methodist Church in 1970. At that time the four separate parishes at Gramville, Ellison, Elisburg and Woodsville had for some time been facing fiscal problems, and decided that by combining they would become more economically sound and successful. Thus the "Four Steeples Parish" was organized, sharing two pastors between the four congregations. There is cooperation between the towns as they collectively plan

and approve an annual budget, and recognize lay leaders and speakers who travel to each parish.

Gramville and Ellison each had active parent-teacher organizations, which merged into one organization with leadership shared by members of both communities at the time of the merger (1984-85). Community support of and participation in school functions will be discussed in a later section.

There is an annual fair in the summer which Gramville hosts at its school grounds. This has been held for the past ten years, and represents a reestablishment of an event which was begun in the 1800's.

The strong sense of neighborhood or community was evidenced in interviews we conducted with community members. One parent, a past president of the Ellison PTO, explained her observations of this "aura" from the perspective of an outsider (she married a Ellison resident):

> There's something that's here, I don't know what it is...This is where you live,this is home, there's something about this area that the people that are here, this is their land. It's almost like going back to the early days, with people believing this as being their land and their home, and people that are here believe that. They have this deep feeling for their area, for their community and belonging, they will do anything for anybody. As long as you are here, as long as you are in the community ...I'm an outsider, my mother-in-law calls me an outsider. I came in here, and I'm changing things which is the way the outsiders do. The people that have been here for life, take it the way it's always been...And a lot of the people that are voicing things are us people that came in. That we're used to things in other places and can't understand how these people can live like this. But I think after five years, I've mellowed out and I have the same feeling that my husband does; I wouldn't leave here either.

The existence of a great number of scholarships within Gramville-Ellison is further evidence of the premium placed on schooling. In 1985 there were approximately 75 Elementary and Secondary level awards made at graduation. The commitment to education at Gramville is evident in the history of its school, the Union Academy, and the pride and vociferous support exhibited by alumni during the reorganization and, more recently, during discussion of a proposed new building. Many Ellison residents, at least those with children in the schools, have also displayed a commitment to their school. There was (and remains) a significant concern among Ellison people against a loss of identity and history which might ensue from the reorganization. Nowhere is this more evident than in the decision of the two districts' Alumni Associations to hold separate alumni banquets for the new district's graduating class of 1985, choosing to maintain their identity and history even as their respective alma maters have merged into a new entity.

We turn next to a discussion of the two districts' history.

History of the Ellison School District

As settlers moved into the Ellison/Ellisburg area in the early to mid-1800s, a number of small elementary schools were built. There were 13 such schools operating within the approximate borders of the present day Ellison village, each offering instruction in one or two rooms. Often these schools were merely a large room in a private home. Common school

district #8, Ellison village, appears on record as early as 1843, but it is presumed by local residents that there was a school there before that. (There exist accounts of a school built by one Jesse Hopkins in Ellison Harbor as early as 1812.) Nevertheless, it is certain that the District #8 school, at least since 1843, occupied the same site on the hill where the current school now stands.

In 1860 a two-story wood frame building was erected at the present site, housing two teachers and 75 pupils, primarily elementary grades. This building was to last until 1932.

In 1899 modifications were made to the 1860 building and it was chartered with New York State as a Union Free School named "Ellison Union School, District #8".[2]

As a chartered Union Free School, Ellison housed grades 1-4 and 5-8 in two classrooms on the first floor, and two years of high school on the second floor. Children from several of the smaller neighboring schools came to Ellison for the high school grades. The first principal of the newly chartered school, John Montague, was paid $500 per year.

Area students who wished to receive a high school education either informally received instruction from teachers at the Ellison school, or were sent to the Union Academy at Gramville or Hungerford Institute at Philby Center.

Ellison resident:

> Years ago back in my father's time...before they had the merger...they went from here, they went to Gramville to school. In other words, to finish their high school, the last two years.

In both cases tuition was required, unless the Ellison student lived on property which was contiguous to the Gramville or Philby Center district (see below).

A long time Ellison resident recalls his school days at the turn of the century. The headmaster at this time was one Professor Carr:

> Mr. Carr was a great teacher. He didn't allow smoking, drinking or swearing on the school property. If any of us kids were caught breaking the rules, we regretted it, as we were immediately sent up to the Prof's office.

Another Ellison graduate from that era recalls the school in the early 1900's:

> The school bell was in a cupola atop the building and was rung by privileged students at the proper times (I got to ring it once)....Drinking water was provided in ceramic water coolers (wonder what happened to them--they were real antiques!) and paper cups. In back at a discreet distance were the boys (left) and girls (right) privies, separated by a high board fence. These arrangements led to a high degree of self-discipline and restraint, especially in winter.

By the 1930's the building was wearing out. The current Gramville Ellison board president recalls cracks in the second floor walls so wide that daylight could be seen through them. After some community discussion and publicity, the residents of Ellison voted in April of 1931 to centralize the district and to erect a new building. Centralization involved combining nine local common districts. A bond issue was authorized for $130,000 (recall that this was in the depths of the depression, a tribute to the courage and generosity of the people of Ellison). The new district was named the "Ellison Central School, District #8 of the towns of Ellisburg and Ellison." It was the fourth central

school in South Jackson County (after Philby Center, Gramville and Fanisville).

The new school building housed 12 grades (no kindergarten) with two elementary grades per teacher (combined classes for grades 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6, and 7 and 8) and four years of high school. Between the spring of 1931 and the spring of 1932, while the new building was being built, some of the one-room district schools were kept open. The current board president recalls the brand new building:

> We moved in the spring of 1932 - what a deal! Everything was new. Desks, lockers, indoor toilets, drinking fountains, a gym--oh boy! I think most of us would have clobbered any kid who made a mark on it! We even had a lunch room, and the PTA sponsored a hot lunch item...

The new district's boundaries were determined in part by the previous school's proximity to Gramville and Philby, because of the four year high schools in each of these villages. It was common prior to 1931 for many of the local children to attend one of these schools for their final two years to complete their education. Families were allowed to be in one of these districts if their property bordered it, thereby saving tuition charges for their children. As a result, much of the old district's boundaries run along property lines. The resulting irregular shapes of the school districts is due to this unusual arrangement.

History of the Gramville School District

Union Academy in Gramville was an unlikely secondary school when it was begun in 1824 by Joshua Bradley. In the first quarter of the century the region was just emerging from the frontier. It was isolated from main lines of travel, accessible only by tenuous railroad tracks. The population of Gramville had never exceeded 400. Its greatest assets were its fertile soil and its New England stock "with a tradition of hard work and a commitment to education."[3]

Bradley, a preacher and teacher from Massachusetts who had gone to Brown University, founded eight academies throughout the Northeast, Gramville's being one of them. He gained subscriptions going door to door and farm to farm. A century later at the 100th anniversary pageant to the school, Charles J. Galpin, who had been a principal of the academy as well as an author of a Department of Agriculture study on the farming community in the district (see the following section on the Galpin study), described the founding of the academy in this way:

> The real wonder is that Joshua Bradley, while the wolf's howl was still a nightly occurrence, while the settlers were hardly settled, succeeded in arousing among those farm families the belief that they could support there and then a school of higher learning.

After two years of hard work, Bradley obtained an act of incorporation for the "Union Literary Society" on April 13, 1826. Twenty-four farmers constituted the first board of trustees. He received a six acre parcel of land from Giles Hall (the same early settler whose name was used for the township before it

became Gramville) for a campus, with the stipulation that it be "forever used for school purposes". In 1828 a two-story stone building was erected to house the boys and girls attending the first school, which included grades nine through twelve. It was built with the labor of dozens of local people aided by gifts of lumber, stone, nails and money.

The first decade of existence was a precarious one for the Academy. Enrollment hovered between 30 to 53 high school students, which was too small to be efficient. There was substantial growth in the 1840's (which saw an average enrollment of 93) and the 1850's (enrollment averaged 214). During this time the academy remained fairly local in character with few students attending from outside of 10-12 miles. In 1856 a spacious three story wooden frame structure was erected.

The academy in those days was notoriously straight-laced, placing an utmost premium on the moral character of their staff and students. Teaching applicants were required to furnish certificates of moral character if they were unknown to the faculty or one or more members of the Board of Trustees. Students attended public worship on the Sabbath, and naturally profane language, games of chance, tobacco and intoxicating liquors were strictly forbidden. In the pursuit of a "higher standard of culture" and "more thorough scholarship", men and women recited in the same classes and ate at the same tables, and were permitted to mingle on the front grounds or in the parlor in

the presence of their teachers. But private meetings at any time or place were "deprecated by parents and teachers."

When members of the village's churches felt a need for a bell to sound the call to worship, they collectively supported the construction on the Academy grounds of a bell house in 1845. It was built at the school because this was a central location between the churches. Although it was moved slightly twice--once in 1856 and again in 1935, the original structure still stands.

The years of the civil war were illustrious for the Academy. There are several colorful anecdotes involving General Stonewall Jackson's visits to the Academy, and the popular support garnered by a group of faculty and alumni who entered the fray as Company K of the 24th infantry.

In the years following the Civil War, the Academy was once again encountering financial difficulties. It was in the 1870s that the President of the Union Academy Board of Trustees, Norris Shepardson, initiated a plan for the establishment of an endowment fund as a solution to the financial crisis. A twenty-year goal was established to raise $50,000 from contributors in the area and alumnus. The goal was in fact reached, and monies were invested in a "Memorial Endowment Fund", the earnings on which were used to keep the academy operational. This fund still exists today, and is responsible for providing many services and gifts to the school.

At the turn of the century, the academy received gifts and contributions of land, money and equipment to provide instruction in agriculture. The Mather School of Agriculture, so named after receiving an endowment from the William and George Mather families (descended from Cotton Mather), was established within the academy in 1901. It was one of the first programs in agriculture at a secondary level in the nation and preceded the Smith-Hughes act by 16 years.

In 1902 the Union Academy became tuition-free by the acceptance of a school tax, thereby becoming public in character. Historical material does not shed light on the circumstances leading up to this occurrence, or on the debate which must have ensued from it.

Fire destroyed the entire school, save for the bell tower on January 29th, 1923. The only solution was to rebuild, and a fund raising was commenced. An appeal issued by the committee to rebuild the school read:

> We must have Old Union. The only way to do this for you and me, and every one of us is to give and give. You are not being asked to give for an intangible or far away cause. You are being asked to keep alive Old Union with her glorious traditions. Without your help these will go forever!

To aid in the fund raising, a "Book of memory" was reinstalled (from the days of Norris Shepardson's original endowment drive), in which the names of contributors were recorded on an "honor roll". Visitors to the school today can still view this book. The drive was successful, and on October

24, 1924, the new and current Union Academy building was dedicated.

In the 1900's the demand for secondary education was greater than ever. The villages and adjacent countryside required a central school for all of the children. At that time the Union continued to be exclusively a secondary school, serving youth from around the county. In 1931 the common school districts in the area agreed to centralize, thereby closing down the one-room schoolhouses and consolidating into one building. The Gramville Central School was created, and in an act both generous and purposeful (to insure the continuation of the Union Academy), the Union Academy Board of Trustees offered the newly formed centralized district the use of their building, equipment and grounds. A lease agreement was arranged whereby the Gramville Central School would rent these facilities for one dollar per year, thus providing a huge savings to the new district by eliminating the cost for a new building. The Union Academy Board continued to own the building and campus, the bus garage, a twenty-three acre experimental farm used by the agriculture program, a wood lot, and a cemetery, although now it was not the formal governing body for the school--a Board of Education was elected in accordance with New York State School law. Shortly after the centralization, an addition to the south side of the building was constructed to house six elementary classrooms and a new gymnasium. A bond issue was passed and the Union Academy

Trustees donated $15,000 from the endowment fund to aide in the construction.

Meanwhile, the Union Academy's Endowment Fund continued to earn interest and receive new monies from inherited properties and monetary gifts. In such cases the Trustees would sell the properties and turn over the monies to the Endowment Fund. Throughout the years monies from this fund have been made available to the school district to provide "extras" to the school (see the following section on the Union Academy).

Since the 1931 centralization the relationship between the Union Academy and the Gramville Central School has been relatively harmonious. Although centralization represented a great change to "Old Union," the benefactors and Trustees seemed to understand that this change would be in the Academy's best interest--for secondary education was soon to be no longer their exclusive domain. Certainly the strong spirit of the Union Academy, and the presence of some of its sons and daughters on the Central School's Board of Education have helped to maintain this supportive and cooperative relationship. The 1984 consolidation with the Ellison Central School District has undoubtedly strained that relationship, as many Academy people feel that the identity of their district is now threatened. Appeasing these individuals with their strong affiliations and commitment to the Union Academy has been a primary task of the administration and board of the Gramville Ellison Central School District.

The Union Academy Board of Trustees

A unique aspect of the Gramville Ellison district is the existence of the Union Academy board, which owns the Gramville school building (referred to as the "Union Academy") and surrounding lands and rents it to the district for a nominal yearly amount. The Board was created in 1826 when 24 trustees were named to oversee the newly chartered Union Literary Society (see earlier section on history of the Gramville School district.)

The grounds and buildings of the original Union Academy Corporation consisted of six acres and a two story stone building, but over the years additional lands have been acquired so that the present building is located on a 16-17 acre plot. The Corporation has also purchased a 23 acre experimental farm which is used by the agriculture program. A cemetery was donated to the Union Academy board along the way as well, although this is not under direct control of the board but is run by a lot owners group.

It is worth noting that none of this acquired land was paid for by taxpayers--all were purchased with endowment monies or donated as gifts or inheritances. This takes on special significance in light of the recent series of budget defeats which occurred in the newly formed school district (see the section on the 1985 budget votes).

The academy's endowment fund was begun by Board of Trustee President Norris M. Shepardson in the 1870's, when an original

goal of $50,000 was attained. Insurance monies received after the 1924 fire burned the school down added to the amount of the fund, as well as did a massive donation drive begun at that time. At present the endowment fund exceeds $100,000. It remains under the administration of the Union Academy Board, which is made up of approximately 35 members with lifetime appointments.

The influence of this board was very great during the period preceding the merger. At first the board displayed an anti-merger attitude, expressing concern about the fate of their beloved institution after a merger. There were so many considerations, fears and uncertainties that an atmosphere of distrust and parochialism prevailed. This was recounted in the following statements by an administrator and a school board member from the larger district:

> Administrator:
>
> I would say most of the opposition seemed to come from this district (Gramville). There were a lot of people who of course wanted to preserve the tradition, the identity of the school as it had been, and they were concerned that they were losing the identity, namely the colors, the name of the school, the mascot, all that would have to go. That was a focus of a lot of the concern.
>
> Board member:
>
> A lot of people demanded answers to questions they couldn't answer like how much savings there would be, and what the curriculum would be, and what would happen to the faculty. There were a lot of questions that people demanded answers to that the Board couldn't provide until a later time. So that made people unhappy.

The Union Academy board of trustees eventually did make the decision to support the merger, after being lobbied by the

administrators. The assistant to the Superintendent recounts that:

> We also got support from the Union Academy Board of Trustees...(They) were approached for an endorsement of the merger proposal. And the superintendent and myself made the case to them and told them what the advantages would be and asked that they support this by an amendment. And they did that. They weren't all unanimous, but they did agree with that they would endorse the merger proposal. And I think that had an effect on a lot of people.

At their annual meeting in October 1984, the Union Academy Trustees officially passed a resolution in support of the merger. Many contend that it was this act which paved the way for the overwhelming vote of approval the merger received in December of that year (it passed by a margin greater than two to one).

Besides acting as both a shaper and informal barometer of public opinion toward the newly formed school district, the Board of the Union Academy continues to make funds available to the new district for special projects and scholarships. Recent scholarship expenditures have been between $3,000 and $7,000 per year, while special community projects average from $12,000 to $15,000 yearly. At the June, 1985 graduation ceremonies for the first class from the Gramville Ellison District, the Union Academy Trustee President distributed scholarship awards to graduating students from both previous school districts.

The 1921 Galpin Study

A Gramville historian provided us with excerpts from an old study which nicely illustrates the attachment between the residents of the village and their educational institution. The

study serves as evidence of the rich sense of community support which the school has always enjoyed.

Gramville was selected as the site of a 1921 Department of Agriculture study on rural migration patterns by Hoag and Galpin.[4] Identifying the village as one which showed few, if any, signs of depletion through migration, the study sought to provide clues for preventing the "evils of over-migration on the one hand and under-migration on the other". The authors state that in this "small agricultural village . . . community life is still strong. Family strains on the farms run far back and are still potent."

While Gramville is depicted as being representative of rural farming communities in terms of type of agriculture practiced and composition of population, there exists "one factor only in which this community differs materially from most other American communities, namely, in the possession of an educational institution of high-school grade for nearly a hundred years, under farmer control." The study terms the existence and history of the Union Academy "certainly exceptional."

Gramville's academy is characterized as a "farmers' institution":

> From its establishment Union Academy has been characterized as a farmers' institution. Its 30 trustees have been local men and women almost entirely from the farms...The history of the financial support of the academy, the annals of the voluntary funds for buildings, the maintenance fund over and above the amount of annual tuition moneys, and the special funds for scholarships, library and endowment show that local farmers in the community...were the maintaining power of the institution. (Hoag & Galpin, 1921)

The authors contend that it is the presence of the Union Academy which has allowed the farming community to thrive, and to avoid an unhealthy degree of out-migration. They suggest that the strength and persistence of the farm families is due to their "rallying around the academy as the central institution." The community is knit even more closely together "by the marriage of their young people who became acquainted while attending the academy."

In their study the authors find that were it not for the existence of the Union Academy, the degree of cohesion in the Gramville community might be far less. The ability to "keep the boy on the farm" is credited to:

> ...a great public sentiment for establishing at the very door of the farms the institutions which all people crave. Neither exhortation nor force will keep people on farms, away from the best of the life of the world; but when the tide of the world flows up into the country and deposits its riches of thought on the institutional thresholds of farm life, the great social motive of youth and middle age for leaving the farms will be undermined.

The conclusion which is reached is that a "fair principle" for all rural communities which wish to keep their population from migrating away to apply is to create an institution such as the Union Academy which will minimize the intellectual and social cravings of the population and thus make persons content to remain in the community.

The Gramville Ellison Reorganization and its Aftermath

Gramville and Ellison School Districts, Before 1980

Gramville teacher:

> They had voted before. The State wanted that Master Plan, that we should be in the South Jackson School District...When they formed the South Jackson, they took a vote here and at Ellison, and in both places they were turned down overwhelmingly.

Ellison Staffperson:

> I think that it's popped up (talk of reorganization) from time to time and I originally come from Fanisville and way back when Fanisville was joined with South Jackson there was talk of trying to get Ellison and I believe also Sager Corners to join and it continually was defeated...

As these quotes indicate, reorganization had been considered more than once during the past two decades by the boards and citizens of both the Gramville and Ellison School Districts. In the State Master Plan prepared in 1958, it was recommended that one large school district be made by combining Ellison, Gramville, and the Philby/Fanisville Central School Districts. When the South Jackson School District was created in 1963 by the merger of previously separate Philby and Philby Center School Districts, both Ellison and Gramville chose against joining with them, though they were invited. In 1968, when the Fanisville School District merged into the South Jackson District, the citizens of Ellison and Gramville were again invited to consider reorganization (through annexation), and this time a referendum was held in each district. In April, 1968 the Gramville community expressed its desire for continued independence by soundly defeating the merger with South Jackson by a three to one

margin. A month later the residents of Ellison followed suit, albeit in a much closer vote (196 against, 131 in favor). Proponents of reorganization in Ellison called for and received a second vote the following year, and again the decision was to remain independent (this time by a vote of 245 against, 150 in favor).

What might explain this desire for independence, and why did these two districts finally capitulate in December of 1983 when they voted to merge and form the Gramville-Ellison Central School District? This section will examine the recent history of the two districts, leading up to and including the merger.

Ellison School District in the early 1980's

School Administrator:

I think the support for the merger was probably a little stronger in Ellison...I think that in terms of the advantages, there were more...You have to remember that they had about 200 students - oh actually less than that. And a budget of one million dollars, almost. So the cost of education per student was close to five thousand dollars a student.

Gramville teacher & Ellison Harbor resident:

They had this organization, I think it started out to be something like the Ellison Businessmen's Association and it developed into, in a sense they were almost like tax revolutionaries...they really wanted to get rid of the school there because obviously these people that are using little places for four or five months and paying outrageous school taxes...

Ellison Village resident:

> You've got a guy that's assessed $140,000 or $150,000...(and) he comes up for three months, we call them our silent taxpayers. We love them, we love them, you know they pay an awful lot to look at that water.

For several years since the failed reorganization attempts of the late 1960's, certain elements of the Ellison community have been interested in some arrangement which would ease the taxpayer's burden of maintaining their school system. Enrollment had plummeted from an average of 275 students in the 1960's to under 200 in the 1980's. During the 1983-84 academic year, the final year before the merger, the graduating class of Ellison consisted of 14 students. The junior class had 14, and the sophomore class had 9 students. Total enrollment in each district the last year they operated independently was 178 students in Ellison, and 374 students in Gramville.

There are newspaper accounts of various Ellison suggestions in past years to combine with Sager Corners, with the South Jackson Central School District, and with Gramville. Plans to bus all high school students to neighboring districts were also considered. Perhaps the most dramatic set of circumstances surrounding the push to lower taxes was the 1981 school budget defeat and the formation that spring of the Ellison taxpayer's association, a group which claimed over 500 members and probably had much to do with the budget being voted down.

Operating under a peculiar veil of anonymity (members refused to allow their names to be published by the press, although they readily supplied the press with quotes and information), the organization carried on open disputation with

the Board of Education and Superintendent Tom Marin. Their agenda included objecting to the 1982 proposed budget increase of nearly 25% from the previous year; claims that the Ellison cost per pupil was between two to three times greater than that of neighboring districts (this claim is not supported by district or Sate records); and the offer to inform members who owned property in Ellison but had their principle place of residence elsewhere of "a method by which they can vote in the school district."

Despite the exaggeration, it is true that the Ellison district had a relatively high expenditure per pupil. This is often the case in districts with a small enrollment, which are unable to take advantage of economies of scale which increased numbers allow. The following table illustrates this point by comparing per pupil expenditures for Ellison, Gramville, and four neighboring districts over the past five years. Each district's K-12 enrollment is listed beneath the expenditure per pupil figure. It can be seen from this table that expenditure per pupil is inversely related to district size:

Expenditure per enrolled pupil in dollars*
(K-12 enrollment)

District	83/84	82/83	81/82	80/81	79/80
Ellison	5491.54 (169)	4811.01 (178)	4165.44 (187)	3904.32 (204)	2939.75 (221)
Gramville	4116.52 (416)	3957.96 (395)	3736.99 (419)	3118.40 (444)	2807.35 (475)
Sager Corners	4194.52 (516)	3782.45 (512)	3519.60 (506)	2988.49 (521)	2670.5 (549)

South Jackson	3952.17 (1820)	3710.54 (1840)	3363.02 (1910)	3022.19 (2039)	2493.86 (2113)
Rederton	3783.79 (4322)	3476.82 (4318)	3253.07 (4389)	2873.04 (4519)	2615.46 (4776)

*Expenditures per enrolled pupil from State Education Department's Annual Education Summary. Includes total general, debt services, and federal aid fund expenditures.

Superintendent Marin responded by first deleting nearly $20,000 from the proposed budget, then issuing a challenge to his detractors to find some indication of lavish waste. "I know in my bones that this budget is not inflated," he told the newspaper, which reported that "he suspects that there is less interest in the school program on the part of some summer residents and those who no longer have children in school" (op. cit). The Board President took a more direct tack toward the taxpayers group:

> We have a lot of people who just come in and vote 'no' on everything. The school budget is the only thing that they have a chance to vote down...They don't care about the children--they only care about their pocketbooks.

The following year saw enrollment drop to 178 students, and the Board of Education initiated a study to consider educating their secondary students elsewhere through a cooperative agreement with a neighboring school. A consultant was hired by the Jackson-Twissle BOCES to study various alternatives more thoroughly. Prime choices for this sharing included Sager Corners, Gramville, and the South Jackson school districts. In particular, the first two of these districts had similarities

with Ellison that seemed to suggest a good blend. One past Board member told us:

> Sager Corners, Gramville and Ellison have one thing in common: they all have many taxpayers that have no children that have lake shore property, and so we have a very high assessed valuation, with few pupils....I was the president of the school board, (and) several times tried to advance mergers....One with Sager Corners, Ellison and Gramville with the overall idea would be a big school on the route along the lake shore....We ran into a lot of complications.

Yet in March of 1982, the School Board made the decision to table their inquiry by adopting a resolution that stated they would decline to pursue any plans to send secondary students to another district for the 1982/83 academic year. The Board felt it was too late in the year to present voters with alternative plans in sufficient detail in time for a May vote. They did instruct Superintendent Sheerin to continue studying alternatives the following year, and they expressed gratitude to the neighboring districts for considering their inquiries.

The overburdening of taxpayers was not the only consequence of the diminished enrollment at Ellison. Despite pronouncements such as the following from the Board President, the academic program at Ellison was in fact suffering.

> I feel that we have high standards at Ellison and the quality of education is one of the best. I think students get more out of an education at a small school.

French was dropped from the Ellison curriculum after the 1981/82 academic year so that no foreign language was offered. High school sciences were offered in alternate years. Class sizes were extremely small; it was not uncommon to have two or three students in a course. The interscholastic athletic program had

great difficulty fielding teams, let alone being competitive. The music program was similarly burdened.

Thus in the early 1980s a picture emerged of a district in dire need of a merger or at the least a creative sharing arrangement with a neighboring school. Despite this need on both fronts--educational quality and economics, it is evident that Ellison was reluctant to give up its identity by being annexed into a larger district.

Setting the Stage: 1983/84

Ellison resident:

> They've got a guy, they're very fortunate, they've got a guy and his influence even came back over here....I think this is a tribute to effort that when you have an administrator who stays for years and years....In the last few years we've had about four or five...and it just isn't fair to the community.

Ellison student:

> Well, really, they have been talking about it for a few years, sooner or later I knew it was going to happen ....Both schools were just getting smaller, they just couldn't keep operating.

By the 1983/84 academic year, declining enrollment in both districts and the resulting consequences on finances and educational programs were causing both boards to increase their efforts to seek alternatives. The suggestion that the New York State Regents Action Plan would soon mandate school districts to increase their curricular offerings (which it did, beginning with the 1985-86 academic year) provided further impetus for the neighboring Gramville and Ellison districts to consider

reorganization. According to Gramville's Superintendent Edward Alston:

> Every year we'd have this tremendous budget problem that we'd be dropping off this and half-timing this and whatever we could. We were cutting back all the time....Ellison found themselves with the same thing. So it was just very timely to both districts.

During the 1982-83 academic year, the districts had experimented with a small number of cases of shared services. Several Ellison high school students were bused to Gramville to take foreign language, math 12, and agricultural classes. Then, in the early months of 1983, an occurrence took place which was to pave the way for the reorganization. Ellison's Board of Education served notice that it would not renew Superintendent Marin's contract.

We have learned from interviews with teachers, board members and administrators at Ellison and Gramville that Superintendent Marin did not have the trust and respect of the staff and community, given its conflicting attitudes toward the school described above. Ellison had for some time suffered from the lack of stability in its chief school officer (see section on the turnover of superintendents at Ellison). There was a lack of consistency in his dealings with staff and board members, as well as a perceived lack of commitment to the district. For example, he and his family continued to live elsewhere while he was superintendent. When it became clear that Marin's contract would not be renewed, it created some operating room for the two districts, given the fact that there were no longer two

administrators involved in the possible merger. With the assistance of the local District Superintendent, plans were laid to explore more fully the prospect of sharing between the districts.

During the months of February and March, 1983, both school boards meet individually and together on several occasions. Discussions centered around sharing services, notably sending Ellison high school students to Gramville for their classes the following year. The District Superintendent was at some of these meetings, and he described a "shopping list" of possibilities for cooperation between the districts, including the sharing of non-teaching and office staff, pupil transportation, and maintenance and bus repair; students attending classes free of tuition in either school to take courses not offered at their own such as foreign language, agriculture and the gifted program; and the sharing of library services, assemblies, school dances, music activities and athletic programs.

On March 24 at a joint school board meeting a unique sharing arrangement was announced to the public whereby the two school districts would share the services of Edward Alston, the Gramville Superintendent, for the following academic year. The Ellison Board had voted unanimously on March 16 to contract with the Gramville School District for Mr. Alston's part-time services. The one year contract period would begin July 1, 1983 and expire on June 30, 1984. The account in the 3/23 Jackson County Journal stated that:

> This agreement is welcomed by both Boards of Education because of the successful tenure that the experienced Mr. Alston has had at Gramville. Members from both boards have met to discuss areas of sharing in these times of economic restraints and declining enrollment. The sharing of a Superintendent will facilitate further sharing of programs. (Italics added)

Edward Alston had been Superintendent at Gramville since 1970 and was a well-known figure in both communities. The terms of the arrangement were to divide his salary and benefits between the districts: 40 percent to Ellison and 60 percent to Gramville. Travel between districts would be paid by Ellison. Conferences and other additional expenses of the Superintendency were to be shared between the districts. Mr. Alston received an increase in pay, and his tenure standing was recognized by the Ellison Board. It was also agreed at this time that a building principal would be hired for Ellison, to fill the daily administrative void left by the departure of Marin. (See the following section for a discussion of the shared superintendency.)

From this point there began a rapid series of events which culminated in the merger of the Gramville and Ellison districts. Some residents in each district felt that the pace was too rapid, causing them to suspect that the merger was a "hidden agenda" from the start. It is clear that the possibility of merger was not being kept secret. For example, the 3/23 Journal article concluded by saying that "a merger of the two school districts has also been cited as a possibility in the near future, but

school officials have stressed that approval by voter referendum would be required before that could be implemented."

By April of 1983 plans for the coming year's shared superintendency were finalized. At an April 18 joint board meeting 100 persons who attended learned that sharing between the districts would be kept to a minimum during the next year--a summer band program would be combined, and Ellison students would be allowed to attend classes in Gramville for languages, agriculture, and other needed subjects. From the account in the Journal, it appears that the crowd had many questions. At this meeting Superintendent Alston expressed his intention to request the State Education Department to fund a feasibility study of a possible merger. Also at the meeting a committee of parents, teachers and students from both districts was formed to study sharing proposals, co-chaired by the respective vice-presidents of each Board.

There is evidence of opposition to the merger at this juncture. At the 4/18 joint Board meeting a group of Ellison residents made known their fears of the impending loss of identity of their district should a merger with the larger Gramville district occur. They also expressed the importance of the role the school plays in the community. Several residents and teachers from Ellison illustrated the role of the school in the community:

Ellison resident:

> Of course the school is (a central point of the community)....It's very rare that you come by at 7:00 at

night any night of the winter or summer where there's not a light on and some group in using it for a meeting....Quite a few of the groups will use the building, it's almost like a community hall type of thing. It kind of takes that place.

Ellison teacher:

From being here 28 years, I don't know whether this would be true in all rural area, but here the school really makes the community. Take the school out of the community and you don't have much left here...it is the core of the community, the heart of the community.

Ellison resident:

I think if they had closed the school here, you really would have lost a lot in the community...which people were really afraid of when they first talked of merger....The school holds a community together. If you take the school out of Ellison, there really isn't going to be anything left, other than our library, and the town store, and the school just brings people around.

Questions and concerns were expressed by Gramville residents as well. What would become of the tradition of the Union Academy should a merger occur? What sacrifices in identity would need to be made?

Through interviews with the district's residents, students, and staff, as well as in newspaper reports, it seems that Mr. Alston met all expectations as superintendent for both districts during the 1983/84 academic year. Even the most parochial residents appeared to appreciate his efforts. One long-time Ellison resident told us:

Mr. Alston is a smart enough man so he delegates responsibility and apparently he's done it well....I'm not one to hand them roses if they don't deserve roses, I'll criticize them just as fast....That community (Gramville) is a very critical place--ministers have a tough time surviving, it's just tough!

The sharing year was a demanding one for Superintendent Alston, as will be discussed in a later section. Throughout the year it seems clear that as far as Alston was concerned a merger was definitely an end goal--the pace would have been too extreme to keep up without the districts moving closer and closer together.

Gramville teacher:

> Probably if he were here, he'd...tell you it was hard on him, because he had to split himself not only in the school day, but he's a very good administrator in the sense that he attends all kinds of functions. He's at just about every b-ball game, soccer game, and he's at all of the concerts and the plays and so on. You get that Chief School Administrator in both schools trying to follow that philosophy and he's tying himself all up in knots. It represented an awful strain on him, and I think the only reason that he would have agreed to it was the fact that he was sure in our future that it would lead to a merger. But that had to have been an awful strain on him.

The Shared Superintendency: 1983/84

Prior to the reorganization the Ellison School District experienced a lack of stability in the superintendent's position. Between 1971 (when Edward Alston began his term as the superintendent of the Gramville district) and 1983, Ellison experienced four superintendents. The longest time any of these superintendents served was five years. The first retired in 1972 after a long and stable tenure. Then in rapid succession the second and third superintendents each left within five years to take more attractive positions in larger districts, and the last (before Edward Alston became shared superintendent) person's contract was allowed to expire by the board of education. It has been said that this person was on "the down side of his career."

The District Superintendent for the region spoke to us about the problems faced by the small, rural district:

> We've had a number of young men in this area that have...taken what is considered a very traditional, career ladder in the superintendency in New York. They have gone to very small districts, and found that they are everything to everyone, and the time and the thin spread doesn't appeal to them, so the next move is to a district where there's a building principal at each building and they take on more of the responsibilities.

The situation which existed in Ellison prior to the merger, according to the District Superintendent, illustrates a small district caught in such a plight:

> But there is some seasoning which has to go on, and in my experience, being in place for three to five years, really it's at the five year mark where you see some of the fruits of your labor....So, I worry about the flash-in-the-pan....The problem that the Ellison Board was looking at was attracting a superintendent of schools at the salary which they were willing to pay....We just weren't getting the applicants...we really wanted.
>
> I think that was the case when they had attracted their last superintendent. The salary was kept too low, it wasn't attractive for anyone with a family who had to move to the area.

The Ellison experience was aptly summed up by their Board President when she quipped: "This is Class A ball. What you get is new guys moving up, or old guys moving down."

Occasionally it may be in the interest of a small district to have a young, energetic superintendent come in to deal with problem situations which call for decisive action which an unbiased outside person may be more capable of. However, the general consensus, according to the District Superintendent and

the Gramville Superintendent, is that such a situation does more harm than good for small school districts.

District Superintendent:

> It (rapid turnover in superintendents) impacts not only on your facilities and your facilities plan, such things as renovation, energy renovation, roof replacement, asbestos, all of those things under the heading. But more than that, it impacts on the instructional program. Things are not completed. Evaluations of teachers are not up-to-date often. By the time you get the honeymoon period over with, and we get into the real nitty-gritty kind of things that the boards, staff, superintendents have to work on, the superintendent is off looking for another position. So there's no longevity.

Gramville Superintendent:

> See, when the small schools go through five superintendents or however many, some of those things never get done. Superintendents, unless they're small school-oriented, don't realize that their responsibility is the boiler to the English department, it's the roof to the cellar, it's the plumbing, it's whatever . . .

The District Superintendent argues that it is important to find creative ways to retain superintendents so as to avoid the situation where things will be started and taken to a half-way point and then abandoned when the superintendent leaves. In order to accomplish the necessary "seasoning" which he mentions above, before one can see "the fruits of your labor", the position must be made attractive. The existence of work opportunities for the Superintendent's spouse and a competitive salary which will allow the family to move and benefit financially, are two necessary components which a district must offer to prospective superintendents.

Given Ellison's difficulty in retaining new superintendents and the economic straits faced by the community (which limited

the amount they could offer a superintendent to the low $30,000's), the decision of the Board in early 1983 to share Gramville's superintendent for the 1983/84 school year was a creative and fairly low-risk experiment. The understanding was that after the initial academic year, either board would have the opportunity to reassess the situation and discontinue it if they chose. At that point the District Superintendent would have assisted the Ellison district in its search for a new superintendent. Even though it worked out that the two districts agreed to merge after the sharing year, the District Superintendent is convinced that the experiment was a success and is a viable option for other small districts which face similar problems. He writes the following:

> However, even of centralization had not occurred, the shared superintendency works well and encourages continued and expanded cooperation between districts.[5]

It should be pointed out that the Gramville Ellison situation was quite unique in that Superintendent Alston was already familiar with the Ellison district and was generally recognized and trusted by their board and community. Attempts at reorganization had been considered several times in the fifteen years prior to the sharing year, and several cases of sharing occurred between the districts prior to the 1983/84 academic year. Moreover, a substantial contingent of the Ellison community was predisposed to support any efforts which would result in a lowering of their school taxes. Citizens living in Ellison Harbor who are childless and maintain a summer or

retirement home in the community were especially interested in tax relief. Given the Gramville Superintendent's familiarity to and with the Ellison District, and the desire of many Ellison taxpayers to cut costs, it is not surprising that the sharing year worked as well as it did. Whether this could be recreated as successfully in other rural districts is not obvious.

Gramville Superintendent:

> You should realize that I had more roots in Ellison as a kid and growing up than I did here, so I knew a lot of people....That (a shared superintendency) is not a viable position for somebody to be in over the years. In the first place, the neighboring superintendent is not the most popular guy in the next town....Anyway, the two of them, small schools, they want to see the superintendent at the basketball games and senior play and they want him at all these things. It would be very difficult, running two places in small communities....I don't think that you're going to hire the next door superintendent in every kind of situation and have it work, it was kind of unique that I knew these people.

In a study by Sederberg on shared superintendents or "multiple district administrators," sharing was found to occur when large scale reorganizations are not politically or economically feasible.[6] Reasons cited by districts for resisting reorganization included the following:

1. the desire for participation in controlling the school's primary educational function;
2. reluctance to relinquish control of school property taxation;
3. economic dependence on school district operations; and
4. social cohesion and identity afforded by school activities. (Pg. 19)

Of these reasons, the fourth is most descriptive of Ellison's past reluctance to reorganize. Like many of the districts which reported shared superintendent arrangements (Sederberg assembled and analyzed data from 21 states involving more than 400 districts and 212 superintendents during 1983-84), Ellison entered the sharing situation to maintain its identity and at the same time improve its educational program and its administrative expenses.

The Merger Deliberated: Summer & Fall, 1983

Enrollments are declining and will continue to decline in both the Gramville and Ellison Central Schools. Reduced course offering have resulted in reduced educational offerings for the students. However, the taxation for school is increasing as educational opportunities decline.

Through a reorganization plan greater educational opportunities could be available to students, while taxes could be reduced.

In summary, this reorganization plan suggests increased course offerings providing a greater educational opportunity for all students with a sizeable financial saving to all the taxpayer of the present Gramville and Ellison school districts.[7]

In May of 1983, Dr. George Frank, a retired superintendent from a school district was hired by the two school boards to conduct a feasibility study regarding the merging of the two districts. Dr. Frank had been administrator during the merger of

two school districts in the late 1960's. His consulting contract called for the study to be completed and submitted by September 15, so that if a reorganization appeared desirable, one could be proposed to the boards and voters before the end of the calendar year.

At a July 13 joint board meeting to discuss the merger, the public and the two boards heard presentations by the District Superintendent, Dr. Frank, and two State Education Department (SED) representatives. The District Superintendent spoke of the history and recent sharing between the districts which had led to the current situation; Dr. Frank outlined the areas to be included in the feasibility study; the Chief of the Bureau of School District Reorganization of the SED presented a history of school district development and reorganization across the state; and the Associate Chief of the Bureau distributed summary materials of the current financial posture of the two districts and the projected advantages of reorganization

At this meeting the following sequence of reorganization events was agreed upon: (1) authorize the study; (2) collect the relevant information and analyze the results; (3) disseminate the results; (4) assess the level of support for reorganization in the two communities via a petition drive and a district-wide vote; and (5) if approved, implement the reorganization. A timetable was proposed which called for the case study to be completed and made public by September 15, whereupon the time from mid-September through November 10 would be used to inform

district residents of the reorganization options and to assess whether there was sufficient public support (to be ascertained through a petition drive). If such public support is indicated, the districts would vote in mid-December of 1983.

Amidst the barrage of questions posed by taxpayers, great concern continued to be voiced regarding the future identity of the two school districts. What would be the new school's name, the school colors and mascot? Would one district (presumably Ellison) be absorbed by the other, or would a new district be created? The minutes from this board meeting indicate that:

> It was repeatedly emphasized that centralization or annexation, although possible for these districts, is up to the determination of the Boards and eligible voters. The differences between centralization and annexation were clearly delineated.[8]

These differences between a centralization and an annexation are significant. In an annexation, one or more districts are dissolved and become part of another (usually the larger) district. In the situation faced by Gramville and Ellison, the Ellison District would most probably cease to exist in an annexation, its students and resources becoming part of Gramville. The other alternative, centralization, involves the dissolution of both districts and the establishment of a wholly new one, with a new board of education. The choice of which form of reorganization to pursue was of extreme importance in this situation.

Each approach involves its own method for gaining voter approval. In a centralization, the votes from each district

involved are combined and then counted, with the majority decision being adhered to. Obviously in such cases the desires of the larger district are most likely to win out. An annexation requires separate approval by each of the districts involved. Voter rejection in either district means defeat of the plan. This was the case in the previous unsuccessful attempts to have the districts join the larger South Jackson School District, when Gramville once (1968) and Ellison twice (1968, 1969) voted annexation down.

The decision was made at this juncture to proceed with the feasibility study and to await its results. The feasibility study was completed on schedule and presented to both boards during the week of September 12. Copies of the report were made available to the public on September 19. A joint board meeting and a Gramville PTO meeting were scheduled for September 26 and Oct. 3, both of which Dr. Frank would attend to discuss the study and answer questions.

In a September 21 Jackson County Journal article reviewing the study, it was reported that Frank's conclusions were overwhelmingly in favor of the merger. He suggested an arrangement whereby the Ellison building would continue to house its K-6 grades and students with some additional Gramville students attending. The larger Union Academy building in Gramville would remain a K-12 operation with all high school and junior high students attending, and a somewhat smaller group of elementary students. The study claimed that significant

improvements would result in the number and diversity of courses able to be offered, and that financial savings would ensue from larger class sizes, a reduction in teaching and support staff, and an increase in state operating aide.

Frank also suggested in the study that the reorganized district's board of education would want to consider possible renovation projects (such as energy efficiency, health and safety standards, and rehabilitating classrooms such as science labs) to take advantage of the additional 30% building renovation aid from the state which reorganized districts are entitled to. This aid is also applicable for new building projects--a possibility Frank and the administration did not broach at this time (see the section on the new building proposal).

Also contained within the study and newspaper coverage of the study were several statements heralding the economic advantages to the two districts as a result of reorganization. These statements were interpreted by many taxpayers in both districts as assurances of lowered taxes for years to come--a misunderstanding which would create problems in the second year after the merger (see section on the budget defeat).

The Merger Decided: Fall & Winter, 1983

Gramville Administrator:

> There was a concern about what kind of cost-savings there would be. Some people thought it would be more expensive if you had the two buildings. There was a concern about taking on the obligations of the other district. We had quite a lot of opposition, quite a lot of emotional types of

opposition. "This is the way it's been always, this is the way it should be, our kids always went here..."

High School Teacher:

From an education perspective it's a marriage made in heaven. I mean there's no doubt about it...because you're talking about the kids, you're talking about the programs and you know...it's what it's all about, the bottom line to me is for anyone who knows anything about what it's all about well then it's good. And for everybody else that doesn't know, it's bad...

Sixty residents attended the September 26 joint board meeting held in Ellison, and Superintendent Alston's guardedly optimistic assessment was that: "there are some for it, and some satisfied with the way it is." In a 9/28 Journal article the superintendent cautions that trying to determine the level of support is just conjecture until the actual voting takes place.

At separate board meetings on October 11 and 12, first the Gramville and then the Ellison Boards unanimously agreed to proceed with efforts to merge the two districts via centralization. Although Gramville might have preferred to annex the Ellison district, it had become clear to Gramville board members that an annexation would be out of the question. Ellison citizens had announced at public meetings and through letters to the Journal that one of their greatest concerns was that they not lose their school or their identity as a result of a reorganization. Thus both districts gave their approval to a centralization process, whereby the districts would in effect combine to form a new entity. This approach, reasoned the Ellison residents, would give them roughly equal footing in the establishment of a new district.

The next phase of the process to be undertaken was the circulation of petitions in each district to determine whether there was an adequate level of support for centralization. The District Superintendent told the press that the petitions were the key to continuing the effort, explaining that the State Education Department Commissioner looks for signatures from approximately 60% of the districts' eligible voters. The petition drive was begun by members of the Gramville PTA and the Ellison PTSO. School officials expressed hope that the petitions would be returned within three weeks.

During the remainder of October and throughout November (1983) the reorganization drive gained momentum via the petition drive and a series of public meetings. A further boost was received when the Gramville Union Academy's Board of Trustees endorsed the centralization plan (see section on the Union Academy Board of Trustees). The petitioners had collected 1,130 of the needed 1,268 signatures by mid-November. The final signatures were collected the following week, and the documents were then verified by the District Superintendent and sent to Albany for review by the Commissioner.

In an information newsletter sent to all residents of the two districts, the Boards of Education collectively pushed the merger. Pointing to each district's yearly decline in enrollment, and the growing erosion of the educational programs in the face of steadily increasing property taxes, the newsletter stated: "From our studies and discussions we are confident that

a merger of the two districts would help reverse this trend. . .We, the members of the Boards. . . ask for your support."

On December 7 approval to hold a vote on centralization was received from SED, and it was announced that a ballot would be held on December 22 in both the Gramville and Ellison schools. Approval of the reorganization would result in a new school district which would begin operation on July 1, 1984.

In another newsletter mailed in early December, the Boards of Education told taxpayers that the reorganization would mean better education for the students and savings in school taxes. Assurance was also given that a new school would not be constructed. In this final message from Board members, voters were urged to support the centralization proposal by casting a yes vote on December 22.

The results of the vote favored centralization by more than a 2 - 1 margin, 495 in favor versus 232 opposed. 410 votes were cast in Gramville, while 318 voted in Ellison. School officials have told us that they believe that the vote results indicated a positive response in each district despite the mixing of ballots prior to the count, which makes it impossible to be certain whether support from each district was the same. It is worthwhile to note that future disharmony over the reorganization often involved the accusation that one district or the other had not been in favor of the reorganization--the vote had been carried by the overwhelming support of the other district.

Opposition to and Support of the Merger

District Superintendent:

> Of course, the Ellison district...it's not a large size, but it's a resort community, so there are some summer residents and some people who live on the river there, and Ellison Harbor, that do not have children in school, you know, they are retired. Or they've winterized their summer cottages and now they live there. That community in particular, that segment of the community, was interested in saving their tax dollars. So, and that was a strong push...

Ellison Staff:

> I would say that the majority of people in Ellison were opposed. Except we have another group, I should point them out, a lot of them are not really taxpayers, but it's the summer element that thinks that they can have a right to vote because they pay school taxes, and they're the ones that wanted to do something to reduce their taxes. And you know, the selling point of merging, one of them is that their taxes will stay down. So they were behind the merger, but not the people that are here year-round.

Although Superintendent Alston reported after the September meeting that the residents of Gramville and Ellison were "generally quite receptive" to the reorganization, it is clear from the 232 negative votes it received, along with many comments at public meetings and letters to the editor, that there were pockets of opposition and concern. It is arguable where the greatest support and opposition came from. Let us examine three prevailing explanations.

The first is that Ellison was overwhelmingly in favor of the merger, given their drastically curtailed curriculum and their rising tax rates. Adherents of this theory claim that most of the dissenting votes came from within the Gramville community from those reluctant to compromise the rich identity and history of the Union Academy. It is suggested that Gramville had less to

gain and more to lose from the reorganization. Their school had a rich and long history, a privately endowed group which had for years been a friend to the school, and an academically viable program which needed "only some discipline and return to the "three Rs" to help it improve. Although this argument has been contested by Superintendent Alston and board members, as well as most teachers we spoke to, certain individuals seemed to share a belief that the addition of the Ellison students did not necessarily help the Gramville school, but all agreed that it was a boon for Ellison.

Gramville teacher:

> I'm sure that most of the students are very bright and just as cooperative as our students are. They just have not had the same continuity that we have had here.

Ellison Parent:

> I didn't go to school here, so when we talked merger, I was only interested in my child's education, you know, and I didn't feel that in a school with 120 kids you were getting the same break.

Ellison teacher and parent:

> I think for the kids from Ellison they gave them so many more choices, not only academically, but even socially. In Ellison...whether the group was headed in the right direction or the wrong direction, you didn't have too many other alternatives....And here it appears to me that you were large enough so that you had some alternatives...and I think for the most part that that's been a big benefit to...the kids from Ellison especially.

A second theory is that opposition came primarily from Ellison residents loyal to their school, who did not wish to lose it and its traditions. They feared the worst from being absorbed into the larger and more powerful Gramville school. This concern

is evident in this statement from an Ellison taxpayer who spoke of the problems he foresaw from joining with Gramville:

> ...the drug problem...we haven't had the problem, even though we've got the influence of the city but apparently in the Gramville area that has been a problem for some time and it's very strange to me...it's a rural area...but gosh, they seem to have their hands full on it.

Although centralization, as opposed to annexation, allowed Ellison to enter the new district on purportedly equal footing with Gramville, the following quotes illustrate objections based on a perceived inequity between the two districts:

> Ellison staff member:
>
> I don't think that Ellison did (unanimously want the merger), but the state did not give us too many alternatives on how we could vote and if it were put up to a vote one way, we would lose our identity, and Ellison didn't want to take that chance....But I don't think the majority of the people were in favor of it, but the way it did go up to vote, we didn't stand a chinaman's chance because there are twice as many voters over there as there are over here.
>
> Ellison taxpayer:
>
> From now on they will outvote us on every issue as far as influence. We've got a local man who's running for the school board because one of their members is retiring...(S)omeone is running over there too, and you will see the input now of this. Even though this gentleman who is running now was former president of this school board (Ellison's), I'm sure as lightning that he won't even get off the ground.
>
> Ellison student:
>
> It wasn't the easiest thing...I was all set to graduate from Ellison and then when the two schools merged, it was a lot of mixed feelings there. "Wow, a new school, a new building", stuff like that, but then the old feeling: I want to be at my own school.

A third explanation is that support of and opposition to the merger was determined not by what community one came from, but by

whether or not the voter had school-aged children or, lacking that, a commitment to education. The majority of persons we spoke to, including school personnel, subscribed to this viewpoint, which explained that persons with school-aged children had studied the reorganization plan and realized that it was in the best interest of their children and their community, as had other individuals with a keen sense of the importance of education. Opposition came from persons with grown children who were more likely to cling to the status quo and seek to preserve the past--exhibiting a sort of "it was good enough for me and my kids. . ." mentality. Even though they had been promised an ease in their financial burden of supporting the schools, these individuals were suspicious of change, particularly that wrought by the state. Thus we have a theory which argues that opposition to the merger came from individuals who had not fully studied the plight of the schools, and were not convinced of the benefits to be gained from a change. Rather, these folks were suspicious of change and resisted it.

Whichever theory one subscribes to, it is clear that support for the schools and the reorganization came from both communities, from individuals who participated wholeheartedly and generously:

> Ellison Harbor retirees:
>
> I don't think Ellison was so concerned with that (the tax rate) as getting a better education for their children, because you know we were able to give them not enough for the number of children that we had.
>
> Gramville teacher:

> The PTA's involved in a lot of things. You don't get many parents out to PTA meetings, but they strongly support PTA....Whenever you have a, like a Christmas party, you'll have a flood of people....When we have parent-teacher conference days, every parent will show up.

New Board member:

> The community is behind the school, comes to all the activities, which is a big switch to me because I was from Jersey (where) no one goes except the parents who are directly involved....They all come and participate. A lot of spirit and basketball games are always mobbed and (so are)...the concerts.

Evidence of discontent continues to emerge periodically, and it is questionable how much attention or weight should be given the occasional letter (often anonymous) to the editor of the Jackson County Journal complaining about how the new district is not as good as one or the other of the venerable replaced ones. Or when the selection process of the new district's mascot, team name and colors has become infused with district pride and stubbornness by the parents of the students far more than the students themselves, it is tempting to not take it too seriously. Yet there are also cases when such unrest has the power to greatly impact the school district, such as the budget defeats of 1985 and the district's response to the proposal for the new building (see the appropriate following sections).

In light of this, it may be prudent to note that in almost all cases where feelings run high, they have done so among the adult alumni of one school or the other.

Athletic coach:

> The students themselves, I don't think there was too much of a problem there, but as far as getting the real support from

the community, I think I found that it was a kind of sit back and wait and see type of thing, see how it went. We didn't...really get both communities behind us right off the bat.

Ellison parent:

I think in general you would find that the younger people were more towards the merger and the older people, you know, the people who had gone to school here and gone to school in Gramville...were the ones that at the beginning were the hardest to accept the thing.

Gramville Student:

I noticed this last year...reading in our paper, the letters to the editor, it seemed like they were having more trouble accepting the merger than we were. To me, I sometimes got kind of upset with the community because they would write letters to the editor back and forth cutting down this and cutting down that. It was like, they weren't going to school here, and if we can accept it and live with it and make the best of it--I think we have more advantages than disadvantages, that's for sure. I figured if we can accept it and do our best than they should be able to, too.

Most students we spoke with indicated an almost serendipitous acceptance of the new school--they were particularly fond of the increase in students in the "social pool" from which team sports, school clubs, and romantic interests were drawn. And teachers spoke of larger class sizes making their teaching more efficient and practical.

Ellison student:

I think back, and if I was still at Ellison this year, my senior year, it would be so boring. But with so may different types of kids and different types of attitudes, and our feelings about things, you can just do whatever you want to and the kids don't mind.

Ellison parent:

There wasn't any of the "Gramville did it and Ellison didn't do anything." It was we did it, and the kids have been terrific. I don't know if you've been in the schools, but you can't tell who's who anymore...

Gramville student:

> But I know when we signed our senior pictures...a lot of people wrote on the back of mine...Gramville kids and Ellison, they wrote, "I'm very glad the merger came about because our schools were quite small to begin with and now we've got a nice class size."

Administrators and parents expressed the hope that the existence of pockets of opposition to the merger would be a transitory phenomenon, destined to abate with the passage of time and the influx of graduates loyal to the Gramville-Ellison school district, who no longer carry the loyalty to the old districts.

Rapidity of the Merger

District Superintendent:

> We (school administrators and board members) feel strongly that by having the vote early...it will give substantial time to implement the reorganization plans....One of the prime concerns of school officials has been that there would be adequate time to work out all the details of the reorganization.

Ellison resident:

> My opposition at the time (to the merger), and I didn't state it, I felt that they should have gone a little slower...the only reason for it was I felt they were going to get defeated...because we were moving too fast.

Gramville resident:

> I felt they moved along too fast. I was in favor of the merger, but taking a little bit more time. Annexation would have been better than centralization....We wasted a lot of money with centralization, just starting from scratch and everything. There was hard feelings about the old traditions in both lots.

Between funding the feasibility study in June and the December vote which approved the reorganization, less than six

months elapsed. The rapid progression of events leading to the Gramville-Ellison merger leads one to question whether the merger was rushed into. Most people in the districts agree that there was a "rush job," but disagree over whether it was done quickly to insure a smooth transition the following year, or to minimize objections from the community and prevent an opposition movement from getting organized.

The District Superintendent describes the pace during the year leading up to the vote, and indicates that the procedure followed was somewhat atypical:

> Well, the other thing we...did do, was we did not spend six months to a year studying the situation....We were advised to make ad-hoc committees by the dozen and have them...spend a lot of time involved with sports and how that would be reconfigure, how will scheduling be reconfigure. We decided not to do that.

Instead the administration trusted their boards to have "their ear to the ground" and anticipate public concerns. The strategy employed was to ignore certain controversial items like naming the new district and selecting the school colors, and to talk in fairly general terms. By focusing on the promise of financial benefits and the advantages of a combined academic program without dwelling on details, dissension which may have accompanied certain hard decisions was effectively preempted until after the decision to merge the districts had been made. While this tactic upset some people who felt a need to know more, it appears to have succeeded:

School Administrator:

A lot of people demanded answers to questions...that the Board couldn't provide until a later time, so that made people unhappy.

District Superintendent:

We let the others (questions) go until after reorganization. Then we involved the students and parents in selecting the team colors and what sports to be offered and those kinds of things. And it worked. Now, I know the sages out there say that's not the way to do it. But, by golly, we got a new district. And we have got very little controversy.

By avoiding controversy and stressing the benefits which would accrue to both districts, the vote was able to be held early enough to have the merger go into effect for the 84/85 academic year. It is clear that this was the intention of the boards and the administration from the start, as illustrated by Dr. Frank's recollections of his initial contacts with the districts:

When they approached me...they asked me if I could do the study so that they could have it late August or early September, because they wanted to have to vote before the end of the calender year....Maybe they felt that before Christmas people are in a more positive mood. Maybe after Christmas when the bills come in you're in a more negative mood...

I know another reason why they wanted to have it as early as possible was because if it did go through they wanted the maximum time for planning, for budgeting as a combined district, which they did in what appeared to me to be a very systematic manner and so, you know, it all turned out very positively.

To persons opposed to the merger, it seemed that there was not the proper amount of time taken to accurately study the merger - to generate and answer questions about whether reorganization was in the best interest of everyone. While this complaint is not often articulated, it remains an undercurrent of

discontent, emerging periodically such as in this 10/30/85 excerpt from a letter to the editor of the Jackson County Journal, signed only "7th Generation Gramville", decrying the districts proposal for a new building:

> Let's get our perspective back--we were rushed into a merger which we could have discussed for 2 years but weren't allowed to.

The current board president (who had served on the Ellison board prior to the merger) concedes that the pace may have been excessive, although she recalls the period before the vote as having gone smoothly:

> Well we met with the Gramville board a couple times, and it seemed to be amenable to everybody (sharing the superintendent), so we did. So from there it mushroomed! I was a little dubious, I though we were too fast at the hurdles maybe...

Another perspective is expressed by two long-time Gramville teachers, who maintain that the reorganization was not suddenly thrust upon the districts but in fact had been studied and deliberated for quite some time, allowing all residents to form their opinions without feeling rushed:

> Yes, it did happen very quickly. A lot of people probably feel they didn't have adequate time to really weigh the consequences, to think it over. But I don't think it was that fast...a lot of us that have been here long enough have kind of seen the handwriting on the wall, and heard it approached just in quiet conversation for quite a few years, really. I've been listening to it for close to twenty years.
>
> It's really nothing new to these people. They've thought about it before and have always voted it down. Well, this time it came up and it was just too good to pass up. People in this district saw Ellison as being a wonderful tax base, not that many more kids, we can absorb easily. People over there knew that they were dead ducks, they were either going

> to have to send their high school kids to South Jackson or Sager Corners...

Administrators and board members deny the charges that the rapidity of the merger was designed to derail an opposition movement by minimizing public scrutiny and criticism. They point out that although the time in which the merger came about was short, a concerted attempt was made to involve taxpayers from both communities in public meetings to air their concerns and their questions. George Frank comments on this aspect of the merger process:

> I think they gave every opportunity to present it...meetings were well publicized in the Watertown Times and...the Jackson Journal....So, I don't think that they tried to hush anything up. The Rederton Times gave it a great deal of coverage. The reporter would call me, "is there anything new, are you having any meetings", you know and he kept things in the newspaper...reporting actual quotations from people and they were not all positive. He'd quote somebody who'd question something.

A discussion concerning the rapidity of the merger must make reference to the events of the summer following the first year, when the school district budget was defeated at two separate votes. These events might be construed as corroboration that an undercurrent of dissatisfaction existed among the taxpayers who felt that the district had moved too quickly. It could be argued that the budget defeats were expressions of the frustration and resentment directed toward an administration which seemed to some to be very used to getting its way with little serious opposition from the public (refer to the section on the 1985 budget defeats).

Creating the New District

Ellison resident:

> This school is used as a secondary kind of like now...you know we're getting I guess you'd say the second line....Anything that's held is held over there (Belleville) basically, intramural teams will meet here, all the activities basically are over there....We lost a lot of things in a sense; you look up here and there's no lights on in the building, the only thing there's a couple of basketball courts in the summer time and we've had the tennis courts that are used by the community....There are no ballgames, or no extra-curricular activities, we have occasionally...board meetings... but our voting...we have to drive to Gramville to vote. We were as a community a little resentful of that...

Once the results of the centralization vote had been certified by the State Education Department, the next order of business was to assemble a Board of Education for the new district. Authorization was first granted to hold a vote in early 1984 to determine the number of members of the new Board of Education and the length of the terms each would serve. Three propositions were placed before the voters on January 27, to establish guidelines for selecting the Board. All three passed, receiving an overwhelming margin of the 219 votes cast. Proposition one established a seven member board (both previous boards had been five person boards), while the second and third propositions set the length of the board terms.

An election was scheduled for the new board on February 29th, with nominating petitions containing the names of 25

qualified voters required no later than February 14 in order to be included on the ballot.

The ensuing election was a hotly contested one, featuring twenty-one candidates vying for the seven seats! Fourteen were residents of the old Gramville district, seven were from Ellison. A meet the candidates night was held two days before the vote. Over two hundred and fifty residents attended, asking questions and listening to discussion on a variety of issues. The event, sponsored by the Gramville PTA and the Ellison PTSO (soon to join into the Gramville Ellison PTA), focussed predominantly on the issue of whether to keep both schools open, with each candidate insuring his/her commitment to do just that.

Voting took place at the Gramville Union Academy Building, with hourly transportation shuttles provided from the Ellison School to accommodate Ellison residents forced to travel to Gramville to vote. The election saw a total of 714 voters go to the polls, nearly the same number which cast ballots for or against the reorganization.

The results reflected the relative sizes of the two districts (and came as some relief to administrators who were concerned with the repercussions of one or the other district dominating the board in the first year of the merger). Chosen were four representatives from the old Gramville district and three from Ellison. Five of the elected board seats were filled by current board members (three from the Gramville Board, two from Ellison), and two members, one from each district, were

elected to serve for the first time. Superintendent Alston notified the new board that their official duties would begin right away with preparations for the centralization of the two districts. Immediate agendas needed in the near future were the selection of a name for the new district, and the development of a budget.

For the remainder of the academic year, Superintendent Alston met with no fewer than four active boards--both of the old five member Gramville and Ellison boards, this newly elected seven member board, and the 35 member board of trustees of the Union Academy. Alston's exhausting schedule was made tolerable by the treatment he received from both boards. According to the District Superintendent:

> The boards were very understanding of the commitment that the superintendent was making...he was human and had some limitations in the time that he could serve. But...in that period, I never heard a complaint from the superintendent...that things were not getting done.

At their April 4 meeting, the board cut four teaching positions, all from Ellison. Superintendent Alston noted that the terminations were based strictly on seniority within certification areas, and it just happened that these were the least senior positions in the two school districts. Several other teachers from both districts took other positions in anticipation of being excessed. (For a discussion of this matter see section on teacher turnover).

One might expect that the loss of only Ellison jobs after the merger would have created dissension and resentment from the

Ellison community. There were an assortment of grumbles from some of the residents. One of the Gramville High School teachers felt that this must also have been the prevailing mood of the Ellison staff:

> They (the Ellison teachers) were very resentful because (our) being the bigger district it seemed like they were always getting the short end of the stick on everything... .They were the ones losing their jobs. They were the ones that had to move to the new buildings for the next year.... They were, you know, more resentful than the original Gramville staff.

Surprisingly, the Ellison teachers we spoke with did not share these feelings. They had been apprised of the process which would be used to excess teachers, and thus knew beforehand what teachers were in jeopardy. They had each understood beforehand which jobs were to be eliminated as a result of the reorganization. A Ellison teacher involved with the negotiations with the new district told us that, "I have a feeling that many of the Ellison teachers thought it was a good move. Of course, those that were losing their jobs weren't too keen on it."

For those who were not losing their jobs, however, a healthy pay raise was in store because in addition to the three year 10 percent per year across the board pay increase negotiated with the new board for all teaching staff in the new district, the Ellison pay schedule was replaced with the Gramville schedule, which was somewhat greater.

> When we started negotiating...they had to decide what to do so what they did was take the teachers in the Ellison building and put them on the pay schedule of the Gramville teachers and then started from there. Otherwise there'd still be a big discrepancy between a ten year teacher (from Ellison and one from Gramville).

Why were the Ellison teachers the least senior between the two districts? The explanation must lie in the fact that the Ellison district in the late 1970s and 1980s had suffered from rapid staff turnover due to its meager budget and its lack of a strong and stable administration. One long-time Gramville teacher gave a concise explanation for the high turnover:

> Primarily just because they didn't have a very high salary schedule. They paid the lowest in the county. They didn't have administrators there for a long period of time either. They shuffled in and out.

Another Gramville teacher summarizes the differences between the districts which led to the unequal distribution of teachers who were excessed:

> Their staff was in every department less senior....They seemed to have in the past a much greater turnover of teachers than Gramville had. Of course their salary schedule, we were a little bit better than they. They were the lowest in the county....They did seem to have a very rapid turnover in staff. Of course one of the things that I think lead to that was that they also had a pretty good turnover in principals in the last, say five years....But all of the jobs were lost from their building that had to be cut.

The Gramville Ellison Central School District: 1984/85 and Beyond

The 1985 Budget Defeats

Gramville parent:

> You know people were talking tax dollars... and it's going to cost more money, and I think what you kept hearing people say is, "...We're not interested in saving money, we're not interested if it's going to cost us...more. What we're interested in is getting quality for our children for the money that we're spending." And I think that's what all these people want. You know that's all I want and I'm sure that's all they want.

Ellison resident:

> There is no way the farmers will ever pass a budget that goes up 7 percent...when they are having such tough times....Being a farm community, it would have taken an outstanding presentation in order to make them vote in a positive manner on the budget.

Gramville resident:

> Some of it's just a matter of we didn't want the budget in the first place, and so...we're just against anything the school does period.

On June 6, 1984, voters approved a $2,742,009 budget for the 1984/85 academic year for the newly formed Gramville Ellison Central School District. Though this represented the first budget for the new school, a relatively small number of voters participated in the budget's approval. Out of 146 votes cast, 94 were in favor of the budget. This low turnout is surprising because the budget contained a much smaller reduction in the local tax levy for Gramville and Ellison residents than was predicted in the Frank feasibility study and by the press. Gramville residents saw an actual reduction of only 4.75 percent, rather than the predicted 21.6 percent; and landowners in Ellison paid 21 percent less on their property, compared to the predicted 35.5 percent reduction (see table at the end of this section).

After the flurry of activity the prior districts had been through in the past twelve months leading up to reorganization, school officials expressed surprise at the low voter turnout. Did the small number of voters indicate that people were complacent and satisfied? Or was the less-than-expected tax decrease not fully recognized by voters so soon after the

reorganization? Events the following year support the latter explanation.

In May and June of 1985 a drama unfolded between the voters of the new school district and the Administration and Board of Education surrounding the 1985/86 school budget, which suggests that the harmony of the year before was a false one. Three times a budget was presented to the voters, requiring a majority vote to pass, and twice it was defeated (the second time more soundly than the first) by taxpayers who complained bitterly that the promise of reduced school taxes was not being kept.

The initial budget presented to the district's voters was for $3,177,318, nearly a 16 percent increase from the previous year. This budget called for the local tax levy to increase by 7-9 percent from the previous year (depending upon the results of a spending proposition included on the ballot). At the annual meeting on May 14 just prior to the budget vote, residents were told that increases were for renovations to the regional BOCES building in Rederton (new roof) and to the Union Academy Building (to be in compliance with new fire codes); higher teacher salaries (a 10 percent increase was approved across the board as a direct result of the reorganization); and the addition of several positions to meet the requirements of the Regents Action Plan (a half-time language teacher, and full time art and music teachers). Voters were assured that despite this increase, the tax levy of $1,103,639 would still be considerably lower than the combined levels of the two districts prior to the merger. At

this meeting there were numerous comments made from a dissatisfied group of taxpayers questioning why the promises of the near past were not being kept. The budget was defeated by a vote of 167 to 141.

Several persons we spoke with blamed the initial defeat on the fact that the administration was not prepared for the skeptical and probing public scrutiny which the budget received. Edward Alston had never had a budget defeat in fifteen previous years. Thus, the presentation of the first budget was lacking in clarity and explanation.

Board member:

> I was surprised that it was turned down, but I guess after I thought about it and said, well why should it have passed? I think we as a board did a very poor job of presenting it to the people...

Ellison retiree:

> First of all, I think the presentation (of the first budget) ...was very poor, it did not summarize anything, it did not compare anything and you could not identify what was happening to the layman, looking at that budget package. So I think that there were too many assumptions that the people aren't going to give us any trouble so therefore, I would say a poor presentation was a very positive reason for this not going through.

Some in the community felt that the defeat was due to more than the presentation. A local columnist wrote in the Jackson County Journal after the vote:

> For the first time in the history of the centralized school in our community the populace voted the projected school budget down. It appears that there is too little understanding of what and why, to find a tax increase plausible after all of the rhetoric that accompanied the new centralization. What happened to 'incentive aid'?... Something is missing in the public understanding of these factors.[9]

A second budget was presented three weeks later. This time it was mailed to all voters in the district prior to the June 5 vote, in a substantially different format from the first which was easier to read and make comparisons with the previous year's budget. The budget was introduced by a letter from the board which enumerated the $41,500 reduction from the first version: cuts were made in the areas of travel and conference expenses for the administration and Board; salaries (some were reduced due to settlements with employees); equipment purchases for maintenance, instruction, athletics and the bus garage; material and supply purchases; and the lunch and pre-kindergarten programs.

The second budget and levy of $1,037,848 represented a 3.06 percent tax increase from the previous year--from $12.64 to $13.02 per $1,000 assessed valuation. The board's exhortation closed with the following statement:

> We support this budget which represents a quality education for all students. It reflects our feeling of what education should be in the Gramville Ellison area. We respectfully encourage you to support this budget by voting on June 5, 1985.[1]

Despite the changes made and the board's encouragement, the budget was again voted down, this time by an even greater margin of 175 to 119 margin.

In response, the Board hastily assembled a third budget with the local levy slashed by another $45,839 (1.48 percent or $15,000 below the 1984/85 year's budget), and offered it once more to the voters with an accompanying letter and explanation. Residents were warned that to vote it down a third time would

result in a contingency budget which would provide for "no library books, no use of the building by outside groups, no athletics...as well as other items determined by the Board." The vote was scheduled to occur in the evening immediately after an informational meeting in the Union Academy auditorium.

In the days before the third vote an impassioned letter appeared in the Journal which sought to explain the past defeats and heal old wounds which may have contributed to those defeats:

> At first I was surprised and angry to hear that the second budget vote in the Gramville Ellison school district was voted down. After some time it dawned on me that in many ways the budget vote was an act of grief from many alumni from Ellison Central and Gramville Central. Even though the merger vote was passed by a sizeable margin, "because the students would benefit," in December 1983, reality hit home with graduations in June 1984, bringing the "death" of Gramville Central and Ellison Central Schools.[11]

The writer went on to exhort the community to get together behind the new school, putting aside "feelings of revenge, anger and grief," and allowing the old districts to "rest in peace":

> Now is the time to use our energies in a positive way. We made the decision to join together, starting a new adventure. Let's follow our children's example and become friends working together. We can make this merger work if we keep trying.

In the third vote, the budget was passed by a 130 to 58 margin.

The events surrounding the board's presentation of the 1985/86 budget served notice that undercurrents of disenchantment and resentment toward the new school district and its administration remained prevalent in the community. What explanations may be given to account for this large vote of "no confidence"? Superintendent Alston admitted that he was

surprised and shaken by the dual budget defeats, and at a loss for a reason why. Perhaps the budget was voted down by older residents of Gramville and Ellison, whose children had long been out of school. While these individuals had remained loyal to the old school which their children and they themselves had attended, they had supported reorganization because of the administration's contention that it would result in better education for the district's children at a less expensive cost to the taxpayers. Yet one year after the merger, taxes were being raised once more. One explanation is that these taxpayers resented the proposed tax increase after they had been "promised" that the merger would reduce their taxes, and they expressed their dissatisfaction at the polls.

Another explanation is the "delayed sense of grief" over the passing of the old school districts, as expressed in the letter cited above. It may not have been until the impending graduation of the first seniors from the new school, in May of 1985, that the end of the old schools' era was fully realized.

A third possibility is that perhaps the merger broke the traditional sense of loyalty of the residents to their respective districts, which had in the past caused them to unwaveringly support their schools despite the large local tax burden. Now that the old districts were no more, the obligation may have been removed, allowing them to vote their pocketbooks and defeat the budget. While this may have applied to those residents of Ellison who had for years loyally supported an extremely small

school, only to see it combined with a larger, tradition-steeped district, it is probably more true for many Gramville residents. They had proven their generosity time and again in the past by supporting the Union Academy, but now they faced a new and confusing situation. Their old school was now a merged school, sharing its rich heritage with another community's. The Ellison taxpayers had received a far greater tax break than Gramville had in the first year of the merger (21 percent for Ellison, less than 5 percent for Gramville), and now in the second year their taxes were again being raised. And because their district was twice the size of Ellison's, it may at times have appeared that their school and community was bending over backward to accommodate Ellison while Ellison taxpayers were making out far better in terms of finances and expanded programs for their children. In other words, some Gramville residents saw Ellison gaining much more from the merger than they were.

Another aspect which may have contributed to the defeats, if not an explanation in and of itself, was that people were just plain angry at seeing a tax increase so soon after they had been promised economic advantages as a result of the merger. Once the first vote had narrowly rejected the budget, disgruntled voters must have felt a surge of power and control in their ability to shout a resounding "no!" to the administration--an ability which they exercised in the second vote.

Gramville resident:

I would say that there are more people with axes to grind of the school system now than there were before. I think some

of them used the merger as an 'I told you so' effect, which is ridiculous because there's nothing valid there, but they think there is because of the way they view it, see. Like a lot of people here think that the merger screwed up their system or something, which it didn't, it made it better in terms of...the priorities...

Board member:

The people were mad enough to vote no, they wouldn't even come to listen, they just know that (the administration) hasn't told me what I wanted to hear...But we have big expenses...they just didn't want to hear it.

A final explanation for the defeats strikes us as extremely convincing. This holds that the budget votes represented a massive misunderstanding on the part of the public toward the projections made by the Frank study and the administration prior to the merger. At issue is the degree to which people interpreted the projection of tax breaks and economic advantages to mean yearly budget decreases, which of course it did not. A past member of the Gramville board related her beliefs to us that there had been a misunderstanding:

When we merged, a lot of people got the erroneous idea that we had said that taxes would go down from now on if we merge... they are not taking into consideration the fact that the taxes just naturally would have continued to have gone up because of the cost of living, because of the increase in all of our supplies and services, the money that we've got to pay out, the increase in the cost of the staff... Now taxes are...a lot less than they would have been individually if we had not merged, but they're not taking that into consideration.

Frank himself told us that what seemed to be missing was an understanding that taxes would not stay low forever as a result of the reorganization, but in fact they would remain lower than if there had been no reorganization. He likened the situation in

Gramville Ellison to one he had experienced in the merger of his old district.

> I remember running into that here (at the time of their reorganization in the 1960s). When I spoke to public meetings I tried to explain to them, you know, we can only really look at the known factors, and that I couldn't guarantee them that the taxes were going to go down, and they probably after the first year were going to go up, just because everything goes up...And we had the same thing, taxes increased the second year and they said they were going to go down. I said, they did go down, but now your factors of inflation and increased programs and all these other things, they're going to start to go up. But I said, they probably would have gone up more if you...(hadn't reorganized) and you wouldn't have as good a program, but they didn't hear this, they only think you told them they were going to go down, and they think they're going to be that way forever.

The following chart shows the tax rates in the Gramville and Ellison districts for the years prior to and immediately after the merger. Each rate is expressed as the local tax rate per $1,000 of assessed true valuation.[12]

Academic Year	Gramville	Ellison
1977/78	$15.46	$14.75
1978/79	$14.69	$14.71
1979/80	$14.34	$14.45
1980/81	$14.41	$16.26
1981/82	$13.56	$15.95
1982/83	$11.34	$16.55
1983/84	$13.27	$16.00

This illustrates peculiar trends both in Ellison and Gramville. Rates had fluctuated over the seven years prior to the reorganization, but in each instance a large increase had occurred in the recent past: between 82/83 and 83/84 in Gramville; and between 81/82 and 82/83 in Ellison.

The reorganization brought immediate relief to both districts, as the following table indicates. However, the decreased tax rate for 84/85 was not as great as had been expected, and the proposed increase for 85/86 reflected in the initial budget is seen to be clearly disadvantageous to Gramville taxpayers in particular.

Academic Year	Tax Rates
1984/85	$12.64
1985/86	
(first vote)	$13.85*
(second vote)	$13.02
(third vote)	$12.45

* These rates calculated using the assessed full valuation figure from 1984/85. 1985/86 figures are not yet available.

The following is a comparison of predictions made prior to the feasibility study with the actual figures regarding the budget. Frank's predictions of the local levy and the tax rate for the first year of the merger are significantly too low. This miscalculation may have raised expectations and created the dissatisfaction with the actual tax rates, even though they did indeed represent a savings.

Academic Year:	1983/84	1984/85	1985/86 Budget #1	Budget #2	Budget #3
District Budget (actual)	-	$2,742,009	$3,177,318	$3,135,818	$3,089,979
	(both districts combined)				
Dist. (predicted or actual)	$1,139,392	$1,007,009 $ 811,891 $1,128,092	$1,103,639	$1,037,848	$ 992,009

Tax Rate /$1,000 (predict. actual)	$13.27(B) $16.00(H) $10.77	$12.64	$13.85	$13.02	$12.45
Percent Drop in District tax bills			4.75% (B) 21.6% (B) 21% (H) 35.5% (H)		

Plans for a new building

District Superintendent:

> Part of the emphasis of the reorganization study, the boards made this very clear at the beginning of the study: the Ellison building would remain open. But that would be, there would be some redefinition of attendance areas, but we would not close the building. That was the commitment the boards made right from the beginning, that the Ellison school was not to disappear.

Feasibility Study:

> It is recommended that the two school buildings be retained...The new reorganized board of education should give consideration to obtaining an engineering study of both buildings with regard to energy efficiency, present day health and safety standards and possible renovations to certain older classrooms (i.e. science labs) to meet current standards. The 30 percent additional aid on building renovation could make any necessary work financially advantageous to the reorganized district. (Pg. 3)

In October, 1985 the Board of Education presented three building proposals to the public which ranged from renovating the present buildings to constructing a new building to house all the children in the district. Superintendent Alston and representatives from the board had successfully petitioned the State Legislature in Albany to pass a special bill to allow the newly formed Gramville Ellison district to realize building incentive aid from the state totalling 89 percent of cost. This

involved combining the normal additional aid (aid that was available because the districts reorganized) of 30 percent with the most advantageous of the two district's regular aid ratios, which was Gramville's 69 percent. The Board and administration made their proposals public in November.

The public's response was swift and determined in letters to the paper and at a heated hearing held at the Union Academy Building on November 4. At this meeting a majority of those in attendance expressed opposition to the plan for a new building. Embittered feelings were expressed indicating a general perception that a promise made by administrators at the time of the merger--that the present buildings would be sufficient to house the newly formed district--was being broken.

Ellison resident:

> Now you see...(it's) going on the second year and now they've already talked about (a new building). What they're blaming it on is..."well, we've got to do this because of the fire codes, state mandates", everything is state mandates. The thing of it is no matter what you blame it on, it wasn't supposed to happen.

At the meeting much public dissension to the new building was expressed. Nevertheless, the board made the decision on November 20th to pursue plans for a new building. Although the public was assured that no actions could be taken without first putting a proposal to a vote, reaction to the announcement was expectedly harsh. The level of feelings concerning the board's actions is evident from this letter to the editor in the 12/4 Jackson County Journal, signed only "Overtaxed and Undereducated":

> How can the Gramville Ellison School administration and the majority of the school board be so insensitive to the wishes of the people that they are supposed to represent? It was pretty evident from last year's marathon school budget votes that the people expected them to live up to their promise that the school merger would keep down taxes for the foreseeable future. Those expectations were re-expressed at the recent open meeting on building alternatives, where the consensus of the public seemed to be that a new school or extensive additions to the Gramville school were undesirable, unaffordable, and unacceptable.

Another letter dated 12/11 opined that:

> If the purpose of the Gramville Ellison Board of Education in calling the so called "informational" meeting was to test the waters of public opinion regarding any building program, it should have been immediately apparent to that august body that those waters were frigid indeed....(T)he big money spenders, having forgotten their many blithe statements of economy and efficiency while promoting the merger of Ellison and Gramville schools, plunge us into a spending spree unequalled in the history of either Ellison or Gramville...

Besides concern over cost, much anxiety has been expressed over the fate of the small communities once the schools were closed. What uses would the buildings be put to once they were no longer used? This query was posed in a column written by a Gramville taxpayer in the 10/30/85 Hamilton County Journal:

> What conceivable use could the buildings be put to in the future? ...What happens to the century-old community center that the school is and has been? If neither old building is saleable what responsibility would the new district take to keep the old buildings from becoming eyesores?...The value of any real estate in the hamlet of Gramville without the school present in the community will be nil.

In response to the outcry of alarm and indignation, the board president attempted to address these concerns when she wrote that such "adverse comments" were obscuring the real issue

--that the present buildings are in real need of repair and improvement:

> Now, please be advised, we are not trying to cram this down your throats. We don't even have all the information yet - best site, building plans, ...etc. You will be given this as we get it. It is intended to be thoroughly open with you....What I ask of you is to put aside feelings of animosity and give mature and careful consideration to this project on its merits....I personally feel that a new building is the best way to go educationally and financially for the long run. But it is your decision. If you disagree and the vote fails that's OK. We will have to find another solution.

And another board member addressed the insinuation that they (the Board) had been deceitful by stating: "Let's remember we're all on the same team. We all want the same thing--what's best for our children."

It seems clear that many taxpayers are not prepared to agree to close down one or both of the old buildings in return for a new building. The feelings of frustration and powerlessness expressed at the budget votes in 1985 have apparently surfaced again.

Ellison staff:

> I sincerely hope that, you know, down the road that they're not talking about closing this building....One of the things they were talking about originally was the enormous renovation...over at the Gramville building and boy, I just hit the ceiling when I heard that...I don't think our building is in any worse shape than Gramville's...

While the controversy goes on, there are many who agree that a new building makes good sense for the new district. In an informal poll of the board at the November 4 meeting, four of the seven members indicated they were leaning toward going with the

plan for a new building. One teacher in the district had no doubts about his preferences:

> So the new school, you know it's a wonderful opportunity. It's going to cost them some money but it's like...if I didn't want a new car, a new cadillac, I don't want one, I don't need one, but if somebody says you can have this $15,000 car for $800 you know I would go for it, because it's only logical thinking....Just the physical aspect of it in terms of opportunity, as far as right down to what's happening here, well it's obvious that school over there is a ramshackle, it's not going to last forever, the money that you could put into it is unbelievable....To be able to have the state pick up 85 percent or 98 percent or whatever it is, I feel that...we're in a position that, I mean I would like to see it done.

As of this writing, the Board has taken an option on a parcel of land and will propose construction of a new school for a vote sometime in the fall of 1986.

Changes in District Course Offerings

The reorganization of the Gramville Ellison districts brought increased course offerings to both districts. This section summarizes the changes in primary and secondary offerings, and refers to the suggestions from the Frank feasibility study where appropriate.

Primary Level

Prior to the merger Gramville had a half-day kindergarten and Ellison a full day. Frank recommended that the new district standardize. This has been done, with kindergarten now offered for a full day at both schools.

Prior to the merger Ellison had a combined grades 1 & 2. Frank recommended they be separate after the merger, and this has been done.

Frank recommended that specialized art and vocal music teachers should be available to grades 1 through 6 in both schools. Prior to the merger elementary art (taught by a specialist) was not available in either school, and vocal music was not offered in grades 1 and 2 in Ellison. Since the merger art and vocal music are offered for forty minutes per week to all elementary students.

It was recommended that instrument lessons currently offered grades 4-6 should continue. This has been done.

It was recommended that an elementary chorus and band be available in each elementary building, and a yearly combined concert be held. Since the merger this has occurred, although having the band and chorus separate creates some complications when attempting the combined concerts.

Secondary Level

A wider array of courses and more course sections are offered students since the merger, with the best of both school's programs being retained. The following is a breakdown by subject area of changes in the course offerings, with reference to the Frank plan where appropriate.

English. The program is now differentiated regents/non-regents, making the refinement available to Ellison

students. Public speaking and creative writing are now available to Ellison students. Grades 7 & 8 language arts are new courses for both districts. These are a combination of Ellison's half-year library skills courses, and Gramville's half-year reading skills courses.

Foreign Language. The district has begun offering two languages, French and German, so that students will now have a choice. (A statewide comparison of similar size school districts reveals that only 50% of such districts offer two foreign languages.) Ellison students had no language offered in 83/84.

Frank's recommendation for foreign languages was to continue German and to conduct a survey to see if a second language, probably French, was feasible. No survey was conducted, but because Ellison students had previously been offered French, this was reintroduced. There has since been a considerable amount of public support from both districts for Spanish, and not French, to be offered as the second foreign language.

Social studies. The program is now differentiated into Regents/non-Regents, making the refinement available to Ellison students. A fourth senior elective (local history) was added, to provide for greater selection and to meet the proposed social studies requirements in the Regents Action Plan. Psychology is now offered to Gramville students, and Consumer Education is now offered to Ellison students. Each course was previously offered by one district only.

Math. All 82/83 offerings were continued as recommended. It was further recommended that the informal computer courses offered at Gramville prior to 83/84 be developed into a formal elective course. This has been done. Preparatory algebra is a new offering for all students. Computer literacy I and II are now offered--the advanced course is new for both schools; the initial course is new for Ellison students.

Science. All 82/83 offerings were continued as recommended. Earth science and physics are now available to Ellison students. 10th grade general biology, a non-Regents course, is a new offering for all students.

Business. Advanced typing is now offered Ellison students. Office procedures is now offered Gramville students.

Agriculture. Frank recommended that the "strong agriculture program" presently available in Gramville be continued. Gramville had long offered this program, where students spend a double period each day in grades 9 through 12. A half-year exploratory course is offered eighth graders. Many of the graduates from this program continue in two-year agricultural and technical programs after graduation.

The agriculture program is offered along with industrial arts and home economics as a choice for seventh and eighth graders.

Industrial arts and home economics. Photography is a new offering for all students. Specific homemaking courses previously offered only at Ellison are now offered Gramville

students as well: clothing, marriage/management, parenting, and food. These courses bring the program in accordance with the state syllabus.

Art, music and physical education. Art is currently offered in 7th and 8th grades as well as a high school elective. Ellison did not offer a high school art elective prior to the merger. This complies with Frank's recommendations. An "art history" course will be added in 85/86. Music is offered in grades 7 and 8 as a required course. There is a junior and senior high band and chorus. These meet with the recommendations of Frank's report. Frank also recommended the continuation of a music theory course which was offered at Ellison in 82/83 but not at Gramville. This course was not in 84/85. A course called "music in our lives" will be added in 85/86.

Frank recommended that physical education courses continue to be offered to meet state requirements. Two additional high school physical education sections were added in 84/85. Two "health" classes are taught through the physical education program.

Effect of Reorganization on Athletics and Student Activities

The merging of the two school districts brought greater diversity in extracurricular activities as well as in course offerings. The following chart illustrates this change:

Athletic teams

Name	Gramville	Ellison	Combined District
Soccer			
boys varsity	x	x	x
boys modified	x	x	x
girls varsity	x	-	x
girls modified	x	-	x
Basketball			
boys varsity	x	x	x
boys jr. varsity	x	x	x
boys modified	x	x	x
girls varsity	x	-	-
girls modified	x	-	-
Volleyball			
girls varsity	-	x	x
girls modified	-	x	x
Baseball			
boys varsity	x	x	x
boys jr. varsity	x	-	x
boys modified	x	-	x
Softball			
girls varsity	x	x	x
girls modified	x	-	x
Girls Tennis	-	x	x
Cheerleading			
Varsity	x	x	x
Jr. Varsity	x	x	x
Modified	x	-	x

Clubs and Organizations

Activity	Gramville	Ellison	Combined District
FFA	x	-	x
Senior Play	x	x	x
Yearbook	x	x	x
Honor Society	x	x	x
Student Council	x	x	x
Class Advisors	x	x	x
FHA	x	-	x

Whiz Quiz	-	x	x
Chorus	x	x	x
German Club	x	-	x
Colorguard	x	-	x

Staff Turnover and Teacher Migration

One promise made by the advocates for reorganization was a financial savings due to the need for fewer staff. The table at the end of this section indicates that the predictions made in the Frank study were accurate, and that the new Gramville-Ellison district has experienced a decrease in its teaching staff. It should be noted, however, that this table does not reflect staff increases made before the 1985/86 academic year. These increases were required by the State Regents Action Plan, and could not have been avoided had the districts remained separate.

To accomplish the reduction in staff, teachers with the least number of years of service in their district (according to certification area) were "excessed". Of Ellison's seventeen K-12 teachers in 1983/84 (eleven secondary and six primary), a total of six lost their jobs: a kindergarten and fourth grade teacher at the primary level; and the secondary science, social studies, math and business teacher. Of the twenty-nine Gramville teachers before the reorganization (nine elementary and twenty secondary), five were excessed (or left voluntarily to take other jobs before their contract expired): a first grade teacher and an industrial

arts, physical education, home economics and music teacher at the secondary level.

The Gramville district had experienced a very small turnover of professional staff prior to the merger, while Ellison's experienced a more rapid turnover. This accounts for the greater proportion of Ellison teachers being excessed than Gramville staff. The average teacher in the combined (new) district had 15 years of experience: 16.2 years for primary, 13.9 years for secondary teachers. Of the forty-two teachers who began the 1984/85 academic year, eight had less than five years of total experience, while twenty had greater than fifteen years experience.

Projected vs Actual Secondary staffing levels

at Gramville Ellison

SUBJECT AREA	84/85 LEVELS	82/83 LEVELS GRAMVILLE	ELLISON	TOTAL	FRANKS' STUDY ESTIMATES
ENGLISH	3.0	2.4	1.2	3.6	3.0
FOREIGN LANGUAGE	1.0	0.8	0.5	1.3	1.0
SOCIAL STUDIES	2.0	2.0	1.4	3.4	2.0
MATH*	3.0	1.8	1.4	3.2	2.0
SCIENCE	2.0	2.0	1.0	3.0	2.0
BUSINESS	1.0	1.0	1.0	2.0	1.0
IND. ARTS & DRIVER ED.	1.0	1.4	1.3	2.7	2.0

HOME ECON.	0.6	0.5	0.8	1.3	1.0
HEALTH ED.+	0.4	0.6	0.3	0.9	0.4
AGRICULTURE	1.0	1.0	0.0	1.0	1.0
ART	1.0	0.8	0.2	1.0	1.0
MUSIC#	3.0	2.0	1.0	3.0	2.5
PHYSICAL EDUCATION^	3.0	2.0	1.0	3.0	3.0
TOTALS	22.0	18.3	11.1	29.4	21.9

* Includes computer literature.
+ To be included in physical education.
# To include elementary.
^ Includes elementary and health.

The Band's Rehearsal Trip:
A Controversy In the Press

It is no secret that certain residents remain skeptical toward the Gramville Ellison school district. Criticism and argumentation often occurs around a variety of incidents or issues. It has been suggested that the difficulties encountered by the new district--such as the budget votes for the 1985/86 academic year--are due to the deep resentment felt by residents still loyal to the old schools. While this is undoubtedly true for some citizens, it would be imprudent to suggest that all dissension is due solely to such resentment. There are an assortment of substantive issues about which citizens disagree, as they would in any district. These differences often take the form of lively criticism, which appear regularly in the letters and news columns of the Jackson County Journal.

The following is an example of the kind of small town argumentation over school-related topics which goes on in Gramville and Ellison. It illustrates the fervor with which people seek to maintain their past tradition and their communities. Some say that debate and disharmony are the mark of a vital and healthy district, and may well in the long run act as a catalyst for the improvement of the school system. Such public discourse has been prevalent since the merger of Gramville and Ellison.

A recent controversy in the pages of the Journal surrounded a "commentary" in a column written by long-time Gramville resident, Ed Westphal. He questioned the need for the band and their equipment to be bused to the neighboring South Jackson High School in order to practice in their auditorium. In his column he claimed that there was "quite a fuss" raised concerning why the school administration and the instrumental music teacher:

> found it necessary to take two busloads--one of children and one of instruments to another school at a short distance away in order to provide the children with a 'larger' situation.

The writer went on to remind his readers that the past four Union Academy music teachers "didn't ever have to go elsewhere to produce fine music and championship players."

This was one commentary which evoked a swift response. In the following edition there were letters to the editor from two parents, a band member, and a faculty member, all rebutting the charges and defending the band instructor. It was explained that this was in fact the first year in recent memory that the school

band was participating in area competition, and that the music teacher was in a unique position to recognize the dissimilarities in sound quality between the Union Academy auditorium and the one at which the competition was to be held, as he had graduated from there. Furthermore, practicing at South Jackson allowed the Gramville-Ellison band to use two instruments they do not own--a chimes and xylophone--which were to be included in the pieces played at the competition. One parent went so far as to rail at the writer for voicing his personal opinions in his column under the label "commentary", rather than as letters to the editor, and demanded that he apologize to the band director, the band members, and the school administration for them.

A postscript to the imbroglio was provided the following week, when a letter from "A concerned parent of former Union Academy band students" wrote defending the columnist!

> He doesn't have to apologize for anything that he writes, Mrs. _____. His views on school-related issues reflect the views of a large portion of the community where he has lived a greater share of his sixty years. How long have you lived in Gramville? Fifteen or so years? ....There must have been other selections to choose from the N.Y.S. manual that did not require chimes and xylophone...

Conclusion to the Gramville Ellison Case Study

This study has taken an in depth look at the circumstances preceding and following the reorganization of two small school districts in North Central New York to form a single centralized school district. Because the reorganization happened very recently, there has not been a sufficient passage of time to

fully assess the strengths and weaknesses inherent in the merger. Nevertheless, after a series of interviews with citizens, students, educators and administrators from both districts, as well as a thorough examination of records and documents pertaining to the reorganization, we conclude that the formation of the Gramville Ellison Central School District was a positive and constructive move for the students and citizens of both districts, and that the reorganization process itself was an effective one.

We have noted that the rapidity with which the merger was undertaken created a certain amount of distrust and disharmony, which has had an effect on the public's perception of the new district. The method of counting the votes for the reorganization, wherein ballots from each district were combined before they were counted, may also have contributed to resentment held by several community members who have remained loyal to their community school, allowing them to contend that it was the will of the other district which had imposed itself on them. Had the votes been counted separately this contention would most probably have been defused.

The claims made by the feasibility study, and by the administration and the boards of both districts preceding the merger vote, may have been too unguardedly optimistic. A high level of expectation was created, much of it unrealistic, which might have been avoided had a more even presentation of the proposed reorganization's strengths and weaknesses been offered.

As a result, a situation still exists, and probably will linger for some time, wherein citizens feel that they were lied to (see, for example, the discussion of the budget defeats and the new building proposals).

Nevertheless, the two central objectives of the reorganization effort--to improve the educational programs while lessening the financial burden on the taxpayers from each district--appear to have been met as a result of the reorganization, although we must be mindful that some of these benefits arise because of the financial incentives offered by the State to reorganize rather than from the reorganization itself. We feel that the Gramville Ellison district represents an instructive model to be viewed by other districts around the State who may be considering reorganization.

Notes

1. Frank, G. (1983), Reorganization Feasibility Study, pg. 3

2. In New York State there are three categories of local units charged with the administration of schools: common, city and union free school districts (including central schools).

   The common school district is limited to providing education through the eighth grade. They are governed by a sole trustee or a board of three trustees.

   Cities with populations greater than 125,000 have fiscally independent city school districts, governed by a board of education which is elected or appointed. These districts encompass all levels of schooling from elementary through secondary.

   The union free district may provide high school services when granted a charter by the Board of Regents. These districts are governed by an elected board of education. Central School Districts (and central high school districts), organized under special provisions of the law, function thereafter as union free districts.

3. This section was compiled from the pamphlet, Union Academy, 1824-1972, by Charles M. Snyder, 1972; and from Union Academy: The Survivor of Change, by Maurice L. Herron, 1984.

4. Hoag, E.F. & Galpin, C.J., (1921). The National Influences of a Single Farm Community: A Story of the Flow into National Life of Migration From the Farms. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture Bulletin No. 984.

5. "Consider sharing a superintendent," Journal of New York State School Board Associations, July, 1984, p. 21.

6. Sedarberg, C. (1985), Multiple district administration for small rural schools, Rural Educator, 7(1):19-24.

7. Frank, G. (1983), Reorganization Feasibility Study, pg. 9.

8. Minutes of the July 13 board meeting provided by the Gramville-Ellison school district office.

9. Gramville column, Jackson County Journal, 5/22/85.

10. From the Gramville-Ellison Central School District Proposed Budget for the 1985-86 School Year, p. 2.

11. Letter to the Editor, Jackson County Journal, 6/19/85.

12. From State Education Department Annual Educational Summary, fiscal year 1984/85 report.

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